

On the significance of theme and thematic progression in the development of text

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Abstract: This paper provides a detailed analysis about the themes and the thematic progression of a certain text, with Halliday's Systemic-Functional ideas as the theoretical foundation. Based on this, the paper discloses the significance of theme and thematic progression in the development of text, which includes forming a semantic chain and achieving a comprehensive understanding of a text.

Key words: theme; thematic progression; discourse analysis; Systemic-Functional linguistics

1. Introduction

Halliday's Systemic-Functional (SF) is among the most influential linguistic schools in the 20th century. It is a "sociologically oriented functional linguistic approach", having great effect on various disciplines related to language (HU Zhuang-lin, 2001, p. 408). Discourse analysis is one which benefits a lot from SF. According to Halliday, the adults' language is "a set of highly coded and abstract functions" (HU Zhuang-lin, 2001, p. 415), which are metafunctions: the ideational, the interpersonal and the textual functions. Of the three functions, the textual function is "expressed largely through the ordering of constituents" (Eggins, 1994, p. 273). Halliday assumes that text-forming resources include the theme and information systems: "thematic operations contribute to the lexico-grammatical structure, being realized through the clause..." (Halliday, 2001, p. 133). In this paper, the author will focus on theme, because "the choice of what gets to be theme in an English clause contributes very significantly to the communicative effect of the message" (Eggins, 1994, p. 273). And as for the notion of "discourse", this paper adopts the ideas of Halliday and Quirk, which refers to both oral language as well as written language (HUANG Guo-wen, 1997, p. 4). The smallest unit in the analysis is clause.

2. Theme and thematic progression

Theme is defined by Halliday (1984, p. 38) as "that element which comes in first position in the clause". It is "the starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. So part of the meaning of any clause lies in which element is chosen as its theme". Through the analysis of more than one text, Halliday (1994, p. 67) points out that "in the theme-rheme structure, it is the Theme that is the prominent element...and by analyzing the thematic structure of a text clause by clause, we can gain an insight into its texture and understand how the writer makes clear to us the nature of his underlying concerns".

There are two types of themes—marked one and unmarked one. If the theme is conflated with the

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grammatical subject, it is unmarked Theme; if the Theme is not conflated with the grammatical subject, it is marked theme.

In addition, there is a distinction between simple theme and multiple themes. If the Theme forms a single constituent in the structure, it belongs to simple theme; otherwise, it belongs to multiple themes including the topical theme, the textual theme and the interpersonal theme.

The topical theme: “The theme of a clause ends with the first constituent that is participant, circumstance, or process. Since a participant in thematic function corresponds fairly closely to what is called the ‘topic’ in a topic-comment analysis, we refer to the experiential element in the theme as the topical theme” (Halliday, 1984, p. 52).

The textual theme: It is “any combination of (i) continuative, (ii) structural and (iii) conjunctive” (Halliday, 1984, p. 53).

The interpersonal theme: It is “any combination of (i) vocative, (ii) modal, (iii) mood-marking” (Halliday, 1984, p. 53).

In discourse analysis, the cohesion and coherence of text can not be neglected, to which Theme makes a significant contribution through thematic progression. The concept of thematic progression derived from the work of Danes (1974) and others. “It concerns the ways texts develop ideas they present. More specifically thematic progression concerns where Themes come from—how they relate to other themes and rhemes of the text” (Fries, 1995). Generally, there are three kinds of thematic progression:

(1) Linear thematic progression—the content of the theme of a second sentence (theme 2) derives from the content of the previous rheme (rheme 1), the content of theme 3 from rheme 2, etc.

(2) Theme iteration—the same theme enters into relation with a number of different rhemes.

(3) The progression with derived themes—the passage as a whole concerns a single general notion, and themes of the various constituent clauses all derive from the general notion, but are not identical to one another (Fries, 1995).

These three types of thematic progression bear different names in the corresponding research (Eggins, 1994), yet the progressions themselves are not quite different. In the following part the author will analyze a paragraph from Bertrand Russell’s essay *What is a good man?* within the framework of theme developed by Halliday and thematic progression by more than one linguist to illustrate the significance of theme and thematic progression in text.

3. Analysis of a text

We all know what we mean by a “good” man. || The ideally good man does not drink or smoke, avoids bad
top top
 language, converses in the presence of men only exactly [as he would] [if there were ladies present], attends
texttop text top
 church regularly and holds the correct opinions on all subjects. || He has a wholesome horror of wrongdoing, and
top
 realizes || that it is our painful duty to castigate Sin. || He has a still greater horror of wrong thinking, and
texttop top

considers it the business of the authorities to safeguard the young against those [who question the wisdom of the
views] generally accepted by middle-aged successful citizens. || Apart from his professional duties, at which he
is assiduous, || he spends much time in good works; || he may encourage patriotism and military training; || he
may promote industry, sobriety, and virtue among wage-earners and their children by seeing to it || that failures in
these respects receive due punishment; || he may be a trustee of a university and prevent an ill-judged respect for
learning from allowing the employment of professors with subversive ideas. || Above all, of course, his “morals”,
in the narrow sense, must be irreproachable. ||

Notational conventions:

	clause boundary		Theme
《》	clause boundary: included clause		
text int top	textual, interpersonal, topical Theme		
*	displaced Theme		
[]	downranked clause (in nominal group)		
□	Theme in downranked clause		

Note 1: The author takes reference from Halliday (1984) in the thematic analysis of the above text.

Note 2: Both the included clause and downranked clause belong to dependent clause, such as adverbial clause and attributive clause.

Note 3: The paragraph is from *English* (Book 8) edited by HUANG Yuan-shen and ZHU Zhong-yi.

Note 4: The themes of Clause 1, 2, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12 and 14 are unmarked ones, while the others are marked ones.

The text analyzed in the above part is the first paragraph of Russell's essay *What is a good man*. It consists of 15 clauses, 9 of which are unmarked themes, the rate being 60%. The dominant theme of these unmarked themes is the personal pronoun “he”, which refers “good man”. Before the illustration of its significance, the author will first make an explanation to the style and the purpose of this essay.

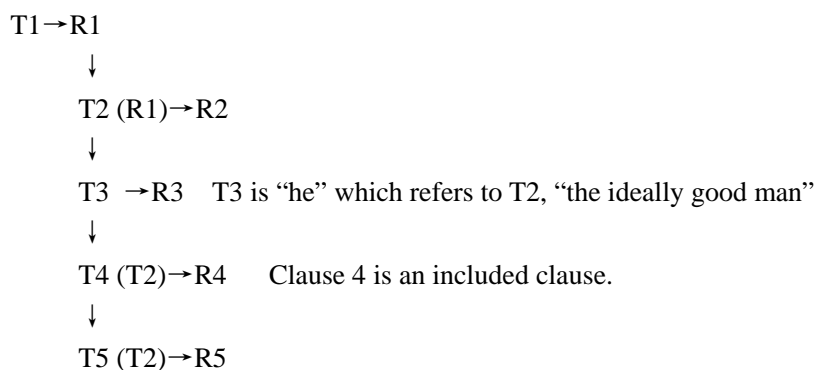
This essay is expository. Exposition is “that form of writing whose purpose is to explain or inform...In writing expository prose, the writer remains aware of two things: purpose and the reader. The purpose is to communicate to the reader what they need to know to understand a subject. With the reader in mind, the writer is able to choose appropriate material and arrange it effectively” (HUANG Yuan-shen & ZHU Zhong-yi, Book 7, 1993, pp. 162-163). An expository essay is also called a persuasive essay which usually “assumes the truth and tries to sway the reader to accept it and then act accordingly” (HUANG Yuan-shen, ZHU Zhong-yi, Book 8, 1993, p. 136). In this essay, Russell wanted to expose that the “ideally good man” in the sense of Puritan principles and the way in which we are taught to be do not exist in the world. Those who appear in the disguise of such a good man are actually hypocrisy. And conversely, the “bad man” in the mouth of some people deserves to be admired

and respected. In short, Russell hoped that he could persuade the people to abandon the religious rigid discipline and believe in truth.

Based on the stylistic features of this essay and the purpose of the author, we see that the unmarked Theme as the dominant theme is in accordance with the purpose informing the reader what they need to know about the subject. In this essay, it is helpful to inform the reader what the “good man” in the Puritan sense is like. The other themes include 1 marked theme and 5 multiple themes. The marked one has the adverbial phrase as the Theme occupying about 16%. This theme is used to introduce other characteristics of the “good man” in the following part of this paragraph. The other 5 ones are multiple themes starting with “as”, “that”, “if”, “that” and “above all” embodying the logical relationship between the sentences. In all these clauses there is no clause with the complement as its theme. This is for the reason that with the complement as the theme, the clause would be inverted completely, which of course can produce the dramatic effect, form strong contrast and emphasize something (YANG Xue-yan, 2001). However, the clause will be tinted with the color of subjectivity, which is probably to make the reader doubt whether the information you provide is the fact or the author’s imagination. Then it deviates from the purpose of the expository. That is to say, the fourteen clauses out of the 15 are arranged in the normal order, which is important in giving the objective information.

Except the marked themes, all other themes are realized through nouns and pronouns. And except the theme of the first clause, all the other unmarked themes and the topical theme in multiple themes refer to the “good man” or related to the characteristics of the “good man”. Therefore, the “good man” constructs the theme of this paragraph so that the reader can understand easily what the “good man” means in the Puritan sense. This thematic pattern, together with the ironical tone in which Russell described the characteristics of the “good man” prepares the reader for discarding the hypocritical Puritan doctrines to accept the light of reason and truth.

Thematic progression deserves much attention in analyzing a text. The significance of thematic progression in the development of texts has been illustrated in the previous part of “theme and thematic progression”. And more than one researcher has done research in this field, (Francis, 1994; Fries, 1995; Cloran, 1995; YANG Xue-yan, 2001). They all tried to prove the hypothesis that “different patterns of Thematic Progression correlate with different genres, i.e. patterns of Thematic progression do not occur randomly but are sensitive to genre” (Fries, 1995). Francis and YANG Xue-yan analyzed newspaper editorials and proved this hypothesis to some degree, though their results are not quite identical. Fries and Francis both found that expository essay should use the linear thematic progression. The linear pattern achieves cohesion in the text by building on newly introduced information. This gives the text a sense of cumulative development. But the analysis of the thematic progression of this text produces a different result. The thematic progression goes like the following (see Figure 1):



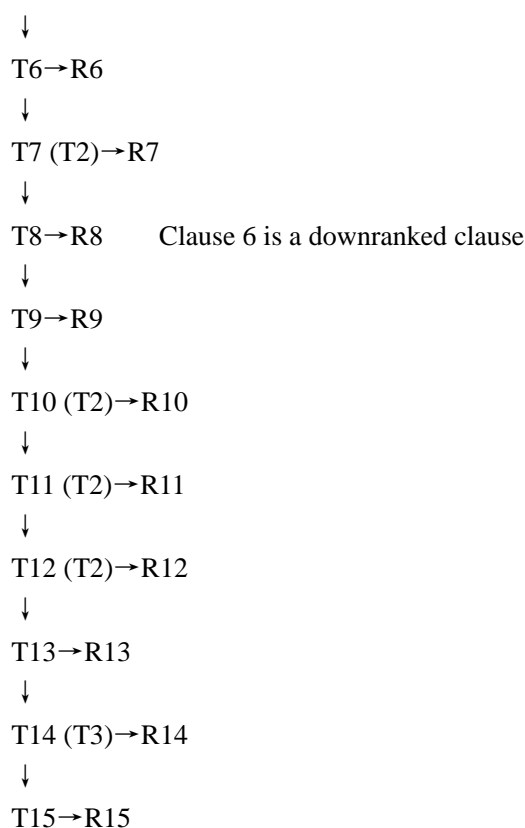


Figure 1 Chart of thematic progression the above text

This figure of the thematic progression of the text shows clearly that it is the mixture of the three patterns of thematic progression, while the dominant one is the pattern of the thematic iteration. Theme 2 is repeated for six times. The advantage of this Thematic progression is that it can keep a text focused (i.e. cohesive) by repeating one element, which is the basic way for this purpose. As we saw with lexical cohesion, repetition is an effective means of creating cohesion. “Having the same participant made Theme on a regular basis provides the text with a clear focus” (Eggins, 1994, p. 302). However, a text in which the theme never varied would not only be boring to read or listen to, but would indicate a text which is going nowhere. But the monotony is avoided in this paragraph by the insertion of some new themes and the fact that the rhemes are about the different aspects of the theme of the paragraph—the “ideally good man”.

With this style of thematic progression, the paragraph develops step by step. Starting from “We know...” Russell reminded the reader that the “good man” is familiar to every one of us. And then he described the taboo, the standards, the psychological state, the duties and the beliefs of the “good man”. The description seems more accurate with the aids of the downranked clauses. The paragraph ended with the sentence started by “Above all...” which provides the reader with the comment of the author on the “good man”. Now the reader has got a comprehensive impression of the “good man” in the Puritan sense.

Obviously, this thematic progression not only organizes the paragraph cohesively, but also satisfies the second demand of the expository essay—to hold the reader’s attention to the text.

4. Conclusion

Thematic system is the law shared in the organization of any language, through which the topical function, the interpersonal function and the textual function can be realized. This can be seen from the analysis of the text in this paper. Strictly speaking, transitivity system only deals with the type processes, the participants and the conditional elements. The tonic system only shows the communicative purpose and the addresser's intention, providing clue or information, things or service. All these do not necessarily have the linear feature and directions. Take the material process as an example. Its actor or agent can be in the front as well as the end of the clause. The process itself can be realized through passive voice as well as active voice. Only the thematic system gives them the feature of linearity and direction. The thematic system is also called psychological subject. So it reflects the reasoning characteristics and the common law of human mind. With Theme as the reference frame, we can infer from the unknown to the known to form a semantic chain and achieve a comprehensive understanding of a text. Hence the safe conclusion that the thematic system is an important basis for discourse analysis. The discourse analysis based on the thematic system is an analysis on good grounds so that the analysis is more objective and efficient.

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(Edited by Max, Tina and Sunny)