

A Study on Semantic Coherence in Discourse Translation from the Perspective of Thematic Progression Patterns*

XU Jun

South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, Guangzhou, Guangdong, China

This paper discusses the semantic coherence in discourse translation from the perspective of thematic progression, and holds that in translating a discourse the translator should spare no effort to retain the original thematic progression pattern in the target text, but when the original thematic progression pattern cannot be directly retained, the translator should construct his own thematic structure and substitute progression pattern in the target text, thus to make it as readable as the original text without distorting the original information structure. This paper also attempts to explore the circumstances under which the original thematic progression pattern can be retained and the substitute should be reconstructed.

Keywords: theme, thematic structure, thematic progression patterns, discourse translation

1. Introduction

The concept of theme and rheme was first proposed by the Prague School. It is designed to study the different roles played by different elements of sentence in language communication. The distinction between theme and rheme is decided by the speaker, what he wants to use as his starting point and what he discusses, determines what is in the theme and what is in the rheme. From the perspective of the hearer, the flow of information is divided into what is known and what is new. In terms of thematic structure, a sentence can be divided into theme and rheme, while, in terms of information structure, known information and new information. The Prague School combines the thematic structure with the information structure, while Michael Halliday separates the two and treats them as two distinct structures.

English scholar Mona Baker (1992, p. 126) holds that the choice of theme does not have any special significance in itself as far as a certain clause in a text is concerned. However, the choice and ranking of themes in the whole text, especially the location of themes in independent clauses, play a significant role in the organization and running of the discourse. Each sentence has its own thematic structure. When the sentence exists alone, its theme and rheme will not change again. Without the connection with context, the theme and rheme are isolated immutably (ZHU, 1995). However, when the sentence located in a discourse or a passage,

* **Acknowledgement:** This study is sponsored by the school-level scientific research innovation team "The Innovation Team of the Comparative Study of English and Chinese Language in the New Era" (Grant No. 2018TD01), and is part of the research of the Guangdong Program of Strengthening Universities through Innovation "An Empirical Study of Innovative Strategies for the Cultivation of Applied Talents in International Business Translation" (Grant No. 2014WTSCX111).

XU Jun, Master of Arts, Lecturer, South China Business College, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies.

its theme and rheme will be connected with those of the sentences before and after, and even change or transpose each other, which is called progression. Despite the various styles and changeable theme-and-rheme cohesive devices of a discourse, linguists sum up the basic patterns and rules of thematic change from seemingly unruly language materials through in-depth study. These patterns are called thematic progression patterns. Many scholars at home and abroad have summed up their own different thematic progression patterns, such as Dane's five commonly accepted patterns in 1974, Xu Shengheng's four in 1982, Huang Yan's seven in 1985, Huang Guowen's six in 1988, Hu Zhuanglin's three in 1994 and Zhu Yongsheng's four in 1995.

2. Discourse Translation Based on Thematic Progression Pattern

2.1 Discourse Translation by Retaining the Original Thematic Progression Pattern

Thematic progression pattern is the arrangement and combination pattern of discourse language materials, which reflects the direction of information flow of clauses in a discourse. This thematic progression embodies the framework of textual structure (HUANG, 1988). It enables the information of the discourse to link up with each other in an orderly manner and the content of each sentence moves naturally to the next sentence. In the practice and research of discourse translation, the translator should take into account the thematic progression and its formation of the overall framework and trend of the discourse, which can help the translator to interpret the original discourse accurately and organize the target discourse by reproducing the original textual effect.

The translator chooses one or some thematic progression patterns to organize the discourse, which reflects the author's communicative intention. These thematic progression patterns contribute to the information flow in the discourse, to which the translator should pay attention and try to reflect the original communicative in the target text. Mona Baker (2000, p. 125) points out that the original thematic progression pattern should be reproduced in a suitable way in the target text. Otherwise, it is possible for the information flow to be blocked in the target text.

2.2 Discourse Translation by Reconstructing the Thematic Progression Pattern

Since English and Chinese belong to different language families and have their own syntactic structure, the translation often, due to different word order (theme/rheme, known information/new information), results in the dislocation between word order and communicative function, which to some extent affects the retention of the original thematic progression pattern.

Baker (1992, p. 128) holds that if the original progression pattern cannot be naturally reproduced in the target language, then you have to give it up. It is necessary to ensure that the translation has its own progression pattern and continuity. When it is not possible to retain the original thematic progression pattern, the translator should, without prejudice to the communicative intention and information structure of the original text, construct a new thematic progression pattern to make sure the target text smooth and coherent, achieving the same textual purpose and communicative effect.

It is to reproduce a coherent, meaningful and smooth target text to construct a new thematic progression pattern. First of all, the translator should correctly understand the original communicative intention of the author, and without misinterpreting the original information structure, resurrect the original message normatively, naturally, coherently and entirely, as a compensation for the loss caused by the abandonment of the original thematic pattern.

3. A Case Study of Discourse Translation Based on Thematic Progression Pattern

3.1 Examples of Discourse Translation by Retaining the Original Thematic Progression Pattern

Generally, under the influence of the structure of the source text, the translator will consciously or unconsciously refer to and imitate the thematic progression pattern of the source text in the translation process. As mentioned above, under certain conditions, the original thematic progression pattern can be retained. Reproduction of the original progression pattern in a suitable way in translation (Baker, 2000, p. 125) is conducive to the complete resurrection of the information structure of the original text and the pursuit of the translation realm of “faithfulness” (see Example (1)).

Example (1)

Queen Elizabeth 2 has a staff of over 900. This means at least one crew member for every two passengers. When you ring for your steward or stewardess, the call is answered with dispatch. Like a good English butler or maid, they are there when you want then and not there when you don't want them. Queen Elizabeth 2 carries so many passengers; you are bound to meet a host of people you like, or love. (Is there time to fall in love on an airplane?) And if you should happen to meet someone you don't like, a game of hide-and-seek aboard Queen Elizabeth 2 can last until Southampton. (Cunard, 1967, p. 11)

Translation:

伊丽莎白女王2号拥有900多位工作人员,这意味着每两位乘客至少有一位船员侍候。当您按铃叫唤服务员时,他们会随叫随到,就像训练有素的英国家仆,召之即来,挥之即去。伊丽莎白女王2号载客如云,您无疑可遇见许多有趣的人,或是您所爱的人(乘坐飞机有时间谈情说爱吗?)即使碰巧遇上个不喜欢的人,您也尽可在船上和他(她)玩玩捉迷藏的游戏,避而不见,可一直玩到船抵南安普敦。(WANG, 2001, p. 86)

Based on the information structure of the whole text, Danes (1974) first puts forward the concept of thematic progression, considering that thematic progression represents the coherence of the text, and listed three basic thematic progression patterns: constant pattern, linear pattern and derived pattern. Halliday promotes the concept further and holds that the former part of each sentence of the text is the theme, while the other parts the rheme.

According to communicative intention, the original text can be divided into two parts: the former part is about the staff, and the other involves the passengers. Both parts are linked by the same object—*Queen Elizabeth 2*. According to Danes and Halliday, the former part contains four themes, while the latter contains three, presented as:

The former part: $A \rightarrow B, B \rightarrow C, D \rightarrow C1, E \rightarrow C2$

The latter part: $A \rightarrow B, B1 \rightarrow C, B2 \rightarrow D$

The former part is progressed into the latter with constant pattern. In both parts, the themes, first part of each sentence, are progressed with linear and derived pattern individually. In the translation, the same progression patterns are retained without any information missing, duplicating the original writing style and resurrecting the original writing purpose.

3.2 Examples of Discourse Translation by Reconstructing the Thematic Progression Pattern

Each language has its own characteristics, only abiding by which can we communicate effectively with each other. Effective translator won't impose the morphological structure of one language on another, but

makes necessary adjustments at any time to convey the source language information with a unique structure in target language. (Nida & Taber, 2004, pp. 3-5) The translator proficient both in the source language and the target language will look for a suitable conveying method (see Example (2)).

Example (2):

值得一提的，是老城老街难以表达的味道。例如：老北京店铺特有的中国龙形象，虬龙木雕挑头，雕刻精美，造型生动；其他如雕工细致的挂檐板，油漆彩绘的木梁柱，变化多端的木质窗棂，屋顶上格式各异的朝天栏杆，古色古香的匾额等等。虽经雨打风吹，早已破旧不堪，但是浸透在里面的浓浓的北京味儿丝毫不减。那些耸立在街头巷尾的各式木结构的牌楼，以其五光十色、重重叠叠、镂空架起的斗拱而夺人眼目。这些历尽沧桑、形迹斑驳的艺术瑰宝，含蓄地诉说当年的辉煌。(CHEN, 2006, p. 2)

Translation:

What is worth mentioning is the unique taste of the streets, as seen in the vivid carvings of Chinese dragon figures on the facades of the shops, the painted beams, the variety of windows frames, and so on. Despite the fact that they have been worn with years of wind and rain, condensed in them is the taste of Old Beijingers in the bygone times. The wooden archways standing in the streets appeal to the eyes of everyone. These artistic treasures seem to be telling people about their magnificent past. (SUO, 2006, p. 3)

In the formation of sentences and passages, Chinese language emphasizes on parataxis with tacit coherence and logical sequence, while English language on hypotaxis with obvious use of many cohesive devices, such as conjunctions, prepositions, pronouns, etc. This is a typical Chinese essay excerpted from Chen Yongxiang's *Old Street in Beijing*. The original sentences are mostly sentences without subjects in loose structure, progression pattern presented as:

$A \rightarrow B, B1 \rightarrow C1, B1 \rightarrow C2-6, C2-6 \rightarrow B, B2 \rightarrow D, B \rightarrow G$

With its words often quoting idioms and ornate rhetoric, the source text describes the shops and archways at the old street, which has a strong national and historical sense of China. According to the content, it is progressed with constant pattern, but appears disorderly in the form. When it is to be translated into English, it first involves a problem that readers can understand clearly. Its communicative intention is to let English language readers understand the historical feelings and details of the old street buildings in Beijing. Secondly, the original text describes a variety of details, carvings of Chinese dragon figures, the painted beams, window frames and so on. To convey the original information smoothly and accurately in English, the translator reconstructs his own thematic progression pattern, $A \rightarrow B1, C \rightarrow D, B2 \rightarrow E, B \rightarrow F$, simplifying the information structure and highlight the theme with constant progression pattern in the form. The translator of Example (2) takes full consideration of the language differences between English and Chinese, not confined to the structure of the original text and the original thematic progression pattern, but to reconstruct the thematic progression pattern simplifying the original information structure by breaking down the sentences of the original text. It is a successful translation example on reconstructing thematic progression pattern.

4. Conclusion

In translating discourse, the translator should first attach importance to the communicative intention expressed by the author of the source text, which is usually organized by choosing one or some thematic progression patterns that contribute to the flow of information in the text. In his translation, the translator

should try his best to resurrect the original thematic progression pattern, meanwhile, take into account the differences between source language and target language in word order, sentence focus and native expression. And then, according to the purpose of translation, the translator could choose whether or not to retain the thematic progression pattern of the source text. If it is needed to reconstruct the thematic progression pattern, the translator should pay attention to logic and coherence, to convey the author's communicative intention without distorting the original information structure.

References

- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words*. London: Routledge.
- Baker, M. (2000). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. Beijing: Beijing Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- CHEN, Y. X. (2006). *Old street in Beijing* (Chinese). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- Cunard, (1967). *Introduction to Queen Elizabeth 2 cruise*. London: Cunard Liner Company.
- Danes, F. (1974). *Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text, papers on functional sentence perspective* (pp. 106-128). The Hague: Mouton.
- HUANG, G. W. (1988). *Essentials of text analysis*. Changsha: Hunan Education Publishing House.
- LI, J., & FAN, X. T. (2008). *Text translation based on thematic progression*. Sinkiang: Language and Translation.
- LIU, F. L. (2006). *Thematic progression patterns in English-Chinese translation*. Beijing: Foreign language Teaching and Research Press.
- Nida, E. A., & Taber, C. R. (2004). *The theory and practice of translation*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Education Press.
- SUO, B. C. (2006). *Old street in Beijing* (English). Beijing: Social Sciences Academic Press.
- WANG, G. Z. (2001). *Advanced interpretation course*. Guangzhou: South China University of Technology Press.
- ZHU, Y. S. (1995). *Thematic progression pattern and discourse analysis*. Beijing: Foreign language Teaching and Research Press.