Thematic Progression Theory and Its Application in EAP Writing

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Abstract. Cohesion and coherence of discourse is one of the major subjects in the research of EAP discourse. The theory of theme and rheme is hypothesized to be an important method for the analysis of discourse coherence. This paper intends to explore first the relationships among the division of theme and rheme and the coherence of EAP discourse. Then, it is to test the hypothesis that the patterns of Thematic Progression can be an effective way of topic development in EAP discourse by analyzing 50 abstracts down-loaded from Nature and Science. Therefore, it is of great value that the theory of theme and rheme sheds light on how to write high-quality abstracts of academic papers in English.

Introduction

There is a increasing desire to present a model of how information is structured through thematisation to help students to write better English articles. Researches on the English writing process and the teaching of written composition have been burgeoning in the last three decades. A more social perspective of the writing process has challenged students and researchers to explore how texts could be extended to be cohesively and coherently in academic contexts. Increased attention to the influence of situational context on writing helped popularize the concept of a genre theory that writers and readers could mock the modules of certain genres when writing or reading in their discourse community. Genre theories have been proved to be effectively in the category of English for Academic Purpose (EAP) writing as one of the empirical pedagogies. However, it will be pale concerning with the intra-logic structures inside the sentences in the academic texts, which will resort to cohesion and coherence in texts. Bamberg (Bamberg, 1983) pointed out that the lack of cohesion in the second language learners' writings contributed substantially to lower scores in examinations.

Cohesion has been frequently studied from the perspective of creating textual cohesion and grammar linking devices (Halliday & Hasan, 1976). However, grammatical linking devices and cohesive ties were insufficient to produce a coherent text (Stotsky, 1983). Witt and Faigley (Witt and Faigley, 1981) conducted the survey to demonstrate that to help students understand Theme and Rheme could improve their writings effectively. This paper tends to apply the thematic structure theory into academic writing beginning by over-viewing the definition of Theme and Rheme, underlying the theoretical framework of Thematic Progression, and then to propose a Theme-Rheme model for writing and summarize its implications for teaching the academic English writing.

Literature Review

Theme and Rheme, as the two fundamental concepts of Systematic Functional linguistics, are borrowed by Halliday from Prague School. If earlier, they could be dated back in the 19th century that Germany linguist Weil (Wei, 1884) created the notion of theme to describe the structural division within a clause, referring to the point of departure and enunciation. Thereafter, a variety of similar items have been stipulated by linguists to further illustrate or explain Theme, such as comment and topic (Bates, 1976), dominance and topic (Erteschik-Shir, 1988), old (known, given) information and new (unknown) information, bound information and free information (Rommetreit,
1974), etc. Among those researchers, Mathesius, the founder of Prague school, had deepened the meaning of Theme and Rheme in his theory of actual division of the sentence. He proposed that a sentence could be divided into three parts: theme, transition and rheme (Firbas, 1966). Transition is the middle part in a clause connecting theme and rheme. However, the notion of Theme and Rheme had not exercised its luminous attraction for language researchers till Halliday (Halliday, 1985) transferred it into his Systematic Functional Linguistics (SFL) research, regarding the two concepts as one part of the three meta-functions in language, namely, the thematic structure, information structure, and cohesion.

In the category of Halliday's SFL, Theme has been summarized as "the point of departure" of a message, and "it is the ground from which the clause is taking off", serving as the four characteristics: 1. the leftmost part of the clause; 2. up to, and including, the first ideational element; 3. what the message will be about, and 4. the reminder of the clause. The following part in the clause constitutes Rheme, the aboutness (Halliday, 1985). In 2004, Halliday amended the definition of Theme as "that which locates and orients the clause within its context" (Halliday, 2004). The amendment does not depart completely from his earlier definition and model in 1985, linking theme and aboutness to be the best known. This article is likely to integrate thematic structure as defined by Halliday (Halliday, 1994), Eggins (Eggins, 1994) and Martin, Matthiessen, and Painter (Martin, 1997), which consists of the organization of sentence information within individual clauses and, through this, to the expansion of a large text containing the logic structure and full meanings.

Comprehensively understanding, Theme integrates familiar, old or given information which makes it the focus of information in the clause and provides the settings for the remainder or aboutness of the sentence, namely the Rheme. On the contrary, Rheme is hypothesized to be the remainder of the message in a clause that has been proposed by Theme. In the practice context, Rheme is typically designed to carry the new or unfamiliar information rather than the old or given for Theme.

**Theoretical Background**

Theme occurs in the first position in a clause and the rest of the clause in which the theme has been developed is rheme, as in:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1. Theme and Rheme.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chocolate candy contains sugar, plus the naturally occurring stimulants caffeine and theobromine.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Theme system organizes the clause showing how it adapts to its surrounding context, thus promoting the cohesive development of the text. According to Halliday (Halliday, 1985), theme consists of unmarked theme and marked theme. The former refers to the subject of the clause mappings with its grammatical subject. Otherwise, it is marked theme. For an instance, the subject of the sentence "Our team won" overlaps with the theme "our team", therefore, it is regarded as the unmarked theme. As an opposite in the following sentence "The rest he spent on chemicals for his experiments", the theme "The rest" doe not coincide with the grammatical subject of the clause. For this point, it is a marked theme.

Furthermore, theme can be divided into simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme. Clauses may contain a multiple theme structure. For example:

- If winter comes (T), // can spring be far behind (R)? (P. Shelly).

The above sentence can also be split into multiple theme structure as follow:

- If winter(T) //comes (T), can spring (T) //be far behind (R)?

Theoretically, in the case of a sequence of themes, textual and interpersonal optional themes should come before the obligatory topic theme, as follow (Martinez, 2003):
A proposal could be concluded form the above example that theme might be constructed by a nominal group, adverbial phrase, verbal group, prepositional part or even a dependent clause. The requirement is that theme should come first in a clause and act as the given information. Theme and rheme are loaded with the role of acting as the bricks of building cohesion intra-clausally in clauses. Cook has offered a suitably succinct and helpful explanation: “Communication might be defined as the conversion of new information into given information, and a successful communicator as a person who correctly assesses the state of knowledge of his or her interlocutor. If we misjudge, and treat what is given as new, we will be boring; in the reverse case when we assume the new to be given, we will be incomprehensible” (Cook, 1989).

Since the new information is the main purpose of communication, rheme is surely to be the focus of a clause, usually acting as the argument in the academic text, providing the new knowledge for readers. The interesting point is that the extension of argument in text has to prolong according to a certain kind of regulation, which is given the theoretical item as "Thematic Progression (TP)" or Thematisation. The item was proposed by Danes early in 1974, referring to the way subsequent discourse re-uses previous Themes or Rhemes according to an overall textual plan. Thompson (Thompson, 2004) defined thematisation as a major aspect of "how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event". Therefore, TP is vital for readers and writers to understand and organize the texts and writings.

Methodology: Patterns of Thematic Progression

The constructing of given and new information in clause is linguistically called thematisation, involving the positioning of information arrangement in a sentence. It is familiar unconsciously for the native writers to place the given or retrievable information from the text or context at the beginning of the clause, while put aside the unfamiliar materials linearly following to the wave of familiar part. The linguistic term for this unconsciousness in writing is theme and rheme. Theme highlights a topic while rheme conventionally comments on the theme. The linear accumulation of themes and rhemes form links in discourse, pushing the discourse to extend to be a full text in what is known as Thematic Progression (TP). Eggins (Eggins, 1994) explained TP as "the exchange of information between successive Theme and Rheme pairings in a text".

TP involves the way Themes and Rhemes concatenate within a text to the hierarchic organization of the text and ultimately to rhetorical communicative purposes. Danes was recognized to be the first linguist who proposed five basic TP models to categorize the types of TP arrangements in discourses. Thereafter, Fries, Eggins and many other linguists have developed and summarized different patterns of matching sentence arrangements with TP. The TP patterns on which this article was based comprised, firstly, a modified version of Danes' progression models and, an extended Hallidayan definition of theme, and an absorbing of other linguists' contribution, as represented in what follows:

1. Simple linear theme progression pattern: The rheme of the first sentence becomes the theme of the succeeding clause, as in the following extract: (T stands for Theme and R for Rheme, N for the numbers of sentences)

\[
T1 \rightarrow R1 \downarrow
\]
\[
T2(=R1) \rightarrow R2
\]
Tn=(Rn-1) → Rn

Extract 1.1: Five score years ago (T1), a great American... sighed the Emancipation Proclamation (R1). This momentous decree (T2=R1) came as a great beacon of light (R2) and hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice. It (T3=R2) came as a joyous daybreak to end the long night of bad captivity.

(2). TP with a constant theme: The theme of the first sentence is repeated as the theme of the subsequent clauses as well. This case is also called Derived hyper-thematic progression pattern.

\[
\begin{align*}
T1 & \rightarrow R1 \\
\downarrow & \\
T2(=T1) & \rightarrow R2 \\
\end{align*}
\]

... 

\[
\begin{align*}
Tn & = (T1) \rightarrow Rn \\
\end{align*}
\]

Extract 2.1: Comprehensive high-resolution structural maps (T1) are central to functional exploration and understanding in biology (R1). For the nervous system, in which high resolution and large spatial extent are both needed, such maps (T2) are scarce as they challenge data acquisition and analysis capabilities (R2).

(3). Cross theme pattern: In this case, the theme in the first sentence becomes the rheme of the second one. And then the theme in the second sentence will become the rheme in the third one, and so on.

\[
\begin{align*}
T1 & \rightarrow R1 \\
\downarrow & \\
T2 & \rightarrow R2 (=T1) \\
\end{align*}
\]

...

\[
\begin{align*}
Tn & \rightarrow Rn (=Tn—1) \\
\end{align*}
\]

Extract 3.1: The play (T1) was interesting (R1), but I (T2) didn’t enjoy it (R2=T1). A young man and a young woman (T3) troubled me (R3=T2). I (T4) turned round and looked at them (R4=T3), but they (T5) didn’t pay any attention to me (R5=T4) (New Concept English, Vol.2).

(4). Split Rheme Pattern: Under this pattern, the rheme in the previous sentence is split into several different items which in turn become the theme of the following sentences.

\[
\begin{align*}
T1—R1 & \\
T2—R2 & \quad T3—R3 & \quad Tn—Rn \\
\end{align*}
\]

Extract 4.1: My favorite three colors (T1) are red, blue and white (R1). Red (T2=R1) makes me feel happy (R2). Blue (T3=R1) makes me feel quiet (R3). White (T4=R1) makes me feel peaceful (R4).

Thematic progression may help students and writers understand clearly the logic structure of academic articles and improve their writing skills.

**Pedagogical Implications and Results**

A thorough understanding of how information is organized and progressed in the texts and the various patterns for constructing these steps into stretches of discourse is vital for academic writing in English. Theme and rheme serve as the building bricks of cohesion and coherence in texts. The arrangement ways of combining theme and rheme are the patterns of Thematic Progression. Native writers may have acquainted with the sub-consciousness of underlying organizations in texts without it having to be taught, while non-native students are less likely to have obtained adequate
exposure to the consciousness of the intra-logic arrangement of target language. Therefore, they may find it thorny to identify any methods in constructing the information to be an intra-logical discourse. The need to write a skilful English academic articles depends not merely upon the grammatical knowledge but also on the higher criteria of logic progression in the discourse aspects. If this is not recognized through the teaching process of English writing, the learners will be at the risk of failing to see the textual wood for the trees of simple lexical linking knowledge from sentence grammar, as McCarthy pointed out: “Low-level learners might be trapped in unnatural patterns (of Theme-Rheme) owing to limited grammatical resources or lack of confidence in a new L2, but most advanced learners are likely to have a good feel for creating topic frameworks and orienting their audience”(McCarthy,1991).

TP contributes to the cohesive development of a text. Thematic choices is a major perspective of "how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event"(Thompson, 2004). The importance of thematic choices brings a practical issue for the non-native English learners, who should be trained in how to choose TP patterns when writing essays in English. Researchers suggest that AEP courses should develop learner's consciousness and linguistic competence in organizing information in texts in a way that is referentially and thematically cohesive (Ventola, 1994). Hawes and Thomas propose that “there is a need for coaching in thematisation… teaching at least rudimentary thematisation theory and giving students practice with an assortment of thematic options…based on our students’ apparent inadequate familiarity with English information structure ” (Thomas, 2012).

Conclusion

Theme and rheme are the two important concepts to organize the information in discourses. At a higher level, they play a vital role in constructing texts to be cohesively and coherently. In academic text, theme act as a crucial organizer of logic extension from the given information to new information. The movements of theme and rheme push the sentences to development into a cohesive text. The way of the such movements is called Thematic Progression. It is important for a good writer to consciously control the flow of information from theme to rheme in the writing process. Linguists have worked out 4 types of TP. Researchers have demonstrated that the lack of consciousness with the concept of theme and rheme will influence the writing quality, but it is quite common for the non-native English speakers. It is therefore proposed that the theory of Theme and Rheme, especially, the Thematic Progression Patterns, will be of great value to be taught in class to help students truly gain control of article structure and obtain an comprehensive scope of the information organization available for argumentation.

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References


