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Thematic progression in the writing of students and professionals

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Advances in thematic progression theory for teachers of journalistic writing.
- Thematic progression as a bridge between sentence level and discourse level.
- Thematic progression in students' essays and two leading British newspapers.
- Suggested variations on Daneš' progression types.
- Marking rhetorical transitions with 'breaks' (non-participant themes).

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

This article outlines advances in thematic progression theory in the hope they may be useful to teachers of writing, especially with non-native and non-European students. Thematic progression denotes the strategies available to writers for linking the themes and rhemes in a clause to those of surrounding clauses. It is a key factor in the structuring of information because it acts as a bridge between sentence level and discourse level, coordinating cohesion and coherence. This paper compares the use of thematic progression in essays by students on a course leading to MA studies in journalism, media and communications with that in two leading British newspapers. It considers how assignment writing could be improved generally by teaching the rudiments of progression theory. If students' assignments are to be clear in their development but also varied and interesting for the reader, additional progression skills are required. In particular, this paper recommends certain variations on Daneš' progression types, as well as the use of more *breaks* (non-participant themes) to mark rhetorical transitions in the text. Familiarisation with the thematic progression in tabloids and broadsheets, respectively, should provide an overview of a range of progression from formal to outspoken, which would raise awareness of what is available, even if not all elements are appropriate for all types of academic writing.

1. Introduction

This article highlights certain recent additions to thematic progression theory which, if taught, should broaden our students' arsenal of choices when structuring their essays in English, whether suitable or not for the specific kind of academic writing they are studying. It further proposes familiarising them with the ways thematic progression is employed in two newspapers, a tabloid and a broadsheet, in order to give them an overview of the range of progression options, from more populistic or hortatory to more formal. While these newspapers are of course especially relevant to media students, an increased understanding of thematic progression per se, including of variations on Daneš' progression types and *breaks* (outlined in the section *Theoretical model*), should be helpful with any manner of writing tasks.

An understanding of how information is structured in clauses and the different methods for combining these elements into stretches of discourse is essential for cohesive and coherent writing in English. Theme and rheme act as the building bricks of cohesion intra-clausally. But their role in thematic progression, which fans out across whole texts and indicates where topics begin and end, also points up a text's underlying organisation, thereby giving them a vital place in coherence. While native speakers may subconsciously acquire such understanding through extensive reading without it having to be taught, overseas students are less likely to have had sufficient exposure to texts in the target language and, even with lengthy exposure, may find it difficult to discern any

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patterns in information structuring in a foreign language. The reason for this could be that there are too many different elements of the unfamiliar language to concentrate on simultaneously. Alternatively, students' assumptions about information structure based on the patterns of their own first language might simply not hold for the one they are studying.

It must at times seem to teachers that we are repeatedly admonishing students for their poor essay structure, yet we are not providing them with the basic knowledge necessary to resolve the problem. If our students are to become coherent writers of English we should explain the principles on which coherent communication depends. Cook (1989) 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:**64**).

The linguistic term for the structuring of given and new information is *thematisation*. This involves the positioning of information in a clause. That which is familiar, given, or retrievable from the text or context is typically placed at the start of the clause, while material that is unfamiliar is placed linearly to the right of it. The two parts are referred to as *theme* and *rheme*, respectively. Although theme usually anchors a text, or highlights a (sub)topic, rheme is conventionally used to comment on the theme. These themes and rhemes then form links with the themes and rhemes of subsequent clauses to allow the text to move forward in what is known as thematic progression (Daneš, 1974, 1995). The need to focus not merely upon traditional sentence grammar but also on the higher level, or combinatory, aspects of discourse is amply demonstrated, if not necessarily recognised, throughout the world whenever students (whose exposure to text structure has usually been confined to the teaching of the 'parts of speech') fail to see the textual wood for the trees of sentence grammar:

> "**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:**58**).

In the past decade or so applied linguists, especially in East Asia (eg Liu, 2004; Wang, 2007; Yang, 2008; Li, 2009) have increasingly rallied to the idea that teaching thematic progression will help improve the coherence of students' writing. Articles illustrating this point therefore introduce the concepts of theme and rheme as in Halliday (1985) and thematic progression as in Daneš (1974), recommending that teachers employ them in the classroom. Unfortunately, while raising awareness in this way is undoubtedly valuable it does not mean that teachers will readily be able to use the knowledge to enable learners to choose appropriate thematisation choices to create natural-sounding patterns. This is perhaps a problem relating less to a student's level of English than to whether or not her/his L1 employs similar information structuring.

Barriers to teaching thematisation have included reluctance to tackle these concepts in the face of unresolved debate as to where theme ends and rheme begins. Space does not permit a detailed review of the different positions here, but they have included Firbas (1995), Fries (1981), Halliday (1985), Thomas (1991), Davies (1993),

Hasan and Fries (1995), Ravelli (1995), Berry (1995), Hawes and Thomas (1997), Hawes (2001), and Fawcett (2007). This present study uses Halliday's (1985/1994) delimitation of theme as everything up to and including the first ideational element, with minor amendments. But the real point here is that for teaching purposes it matters little which definition of theme is preferred. Students need to present an appropriate balance of thematic and rhematic material and to make it clear which is which by placing them in the accepted position — before or after each other — and allowing the text to move forward by employing appropriate progression types.

A further problem has been the assumption that Halliday's (1985) model of theme and Daneš' (1974) three progression types are definitive. This is the opposite problem to that discussed above. Both seminal theoretical contributions in linguistic history, these theories nevertheless require updating and possibly fine-tuning to suit the analysis of different discourse genres and different kinds of research. Accordingly potential modifications will be suggested below.

2. Data

The student data for this study comprise just short of 20,000 words of essays on the topic of The Impact of the Internet in the Twenty-First Century, written in August 2009 by 18 international students, at roughly B2 level, taking InterComm, a pre-MA course at the University of Leeds for international communications, media and journalism. Prior to writing these essays, the students had not been explicitly coached in thematic progression. However, they had completed several InterComm tasks relating to cohesion and coherence in academic writing, to heighten their awareness of discourse structure, the ordering of elements at sentence level and whole text level, as well as how these interact together.

These essays are compared and contrasted with approximately 20,000 words written by professional journalists in editorials from the British newspapers The Sun and The Times in October 1991 (Hawes, 2001; PhD corpus), plus another 20,000 from September 2008 (Hawes, 2010a). In both cases, the newspaper data consisted of ten consecutive days' worth of editorials from each paper.

Whereas a journalistic article could potentially be of almost any length, depending on the importance of the topic to the paper or its owner and the projected interest value for the reader, a newspaper editorial is a relatively stable subgenre, fixed over the years through practice becoming 'tradition'. From 1991 to 2008 there was as good as no change whatsoever in either The Sun or The Times as far as the format and length of their editorials is concerned (Hawes, 2010a). Unlike the fluidity of articles in general, therefore, editorials — particularly in these specific newspapers, which are in effect Britain's most popular tabloid and Britain's traditionally most respected newspaper — allow a degree of clarity and certainty regarding norms. It should also be mentioned that editorials are the time-honoured site where newspapers overtly express their own views on given issues, as opposed to (supposedly) reporting the facts. This means that we can be fairly sure they are the most carefully crafted of all articles.

To specify the format of this subgenre, all editorials in both The Sun and The Times begin with a title, often involving a pun or other word-play, followed by a brief lead in bold or larger font and then the body of the text. In The Sun the lead and the concluding sentence are typically both bold and underlined. Of greater relevance to our students: both newspapers typically include three articles per editorial section, The Sun's being approximately 120 words long each; those in The Times 550 words each. The Sun sometimes extends this to four or even five articles, which are then correspondingly shorter, and occasionally reduces the total to two articles if it wishes to include a double-length article on a matter of