Thematic structure and translation: A case study of the translation of English news into Persian

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Abstract

Thematic structure is considered as one of the elements of discourse that can be explored especially in the process of translation. Therefore, this study was an attempt to investigate and analyze the thematic structure of English news and their Persian translated version exploiting both descriptive and quantitative approaches. Correspondingly, 1000 clauses in English and 1095 translated clauses in Persian were collected from the University of Tehran Persian-English Comparable Corpus (UTPECC). Then, the extracted data were analyzed adopting Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) classification of thematic structure. The results of the Chi-square test highlighted a significant difference between various theme types in both corpora except for topical, multiple, elided and interpersonal-topical themes. Moreover, the results were calibrated with a descriptive analysis of the clauses of both corpora showing that there were two major alterations to the thematic structure in the process of translation including changing of themes into rhemes or vice versa as a general trend which realized through some structural procedures. All the structural procedures and a significant difference between the theme types in both corpora showed that the canonical form of Persian structure was preferred over keeping the English thematic structure in the translation of English news text into Persian.
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Keywords: Halliday and Matthiessen's model; Thematic structure; Translation; Persian; Theme alterations

1. Introduction

There has been a considerable literature about the importance of employing syntactic structures in discourse analysis (they address this issue directly or indirectly (Baker, 1992, 2000; Brown and Yule, 1988; Fahim and Fattahi, 2006; Gee, 2004; Halliday, 1985/1994; Hatim and Mason, 1997; Hatim and Munday, 2004; Johnstone, 2008; Lotfipour Sa'edi, 1990; Munday, 2004, among others)). One of the frameworks focusing on the syntactic structure is that of Halliday (1985/1994) systemic functional grammar. As this framework considers language in communication, it relates the different elements of lexico-grammar used by the writers and speakers to the discourse semantics, register, genre and ultimately sociocultural environment. Following Wodak (2001), this framework is a benchmark for discourse analysis as well as critical discourse analysis (CDA). To put emphasis on the status of syntactic structure in communication, Saldanha and O'Brien (2013:54) assert that ''the purpose of any communication will determine its structure''. This means that, structural features underline

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the function of a text; structural features, among other elements, "[. . .] are some of the different guises in which a language presents itself when we start to explore its grammar in functional term" to obtain and express meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014:20). Amongst other important text features in discourse analysis, in Ventola's (1995) opinion, thematic structure is considered to be a useful analytical tool in applied linguistics, the functions of which vary in different languages. As for the thematic structure, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) consider the clause, divided into two parts, as the bearer of the message. The position determines the first element, "theme", which is the "the point of departure of the message"; the rest of the clause is called "rheme" in Prague school terminology (89). Baker (1992) proposes that dividing a clause into two parts illustrates the *interactional organization* of a sentence or the thematic structure. Similarly, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) further the idea of thematic structure as an apparatus for conveying the message. In the same state, in Ventola and Mauranen's (1991:469) view, "[. . .] in a well-formed text, the thematic patterns should reflect the organization of text-content and facilitate the reading process". Hence, the readability, cohesion, coherence and construction of meaningful language of a text are closely related to how different elements of the clauses and ideas are organized to utter the purpose of the text or the message (Ghadessy, 1995; Jalilifar, 2009; Silva, 1993; Ventola, 1992, 1995; Witte and Faigley, 1981). Nevertheless, thematic structure as a syntactic feature can be realized distinctively in different languages (Baker, 1992; Ventola, 1995). However, the degree of this variance and its acceptability can be taken into consideration as far as translation is concerned.

On account of the fact that the role of *theme-rheme organization* in intertextuality is more than a facilitating role, a vehicle for expressing the ideology of the text (Hatim, 2009:49), the alterations in the thematic structure that may transpire in the process of translation from the source text (ST) into the target text (TT) would result in different ramifications. These alterations in the mode of the text can cause changes in the message. The reasons behind the thematic structure changes can be explained through observing and reporting these variations that occur in the text through translation. Although the importance of this issue in translation is stressed by many scholars such as Alekseyenko (2013), Baker (1992), Enkvist (1978), Ghadessy (1995), Hatim and Mason (1990) and Jalilifar (2009), this area has been less explored.

The most influential studies regarding the thematic analysis of the source text with the counterpart translated version are discussed in the background section of the present study. However, researchers who have explored the thematic structure exploiting the source texts in English and their Persian translated version were Jalilifar (2009) as well as Samandi Rahim and Asgari (2014). To the best of our knowledge, they all have focused mainly on the quantitative aspect of thematic structure in scientific texts rather than a descriptive account of the thematic structure. Moreover the Persian language structure and properties are ignored in the previous studies.

Therefore, as the communicated message in a text is of paramount importance, specifically in news, the present study was an attempt to explore the thematic structure using both a quantitative and detailed descriptive analytical view in studying a total of 2095 clauses in the English source text and the Persian translated version chosen from UTPECC corpus utilizing Halliday and Matthiessen's (2014) model of classification and analysis of thematic structure. In addition, Dabir-Moghaddam's (2009)[1] secondary theme and Farshidvard's (1375/1996) as well as Gholam-Alizadeh's (1374/1995) classifications of clauses in Persian are also adopted for the analysis of the translated Persian version.

In general, the present study tries to find answers to the following questions:

1. Is there any significant difference between the various elements of the thematic structure proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) in the English news texts and their Persian translated version?
2. What structural changes happen to the various elements of the thematic structure proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) in the process of translation from English into Persian?

The null hypothesis drawn from the first question is:

H0: There is no significant difference between the various elements of the thematic structure proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) in the English news texts and their Persian translated version.

In order to answer the first research question and test the null hypothesis a quantitative overview of the thematic structure was hired. Moreover, a descriptive overview to illustrate the changes that happen through the process of translation was taken into consideration for outlining the reality behind the ramifications made for answering the second research question. Knowing all the changes in this regard will help the translators and linguists to consider the process of translation as a medium through which some evadable (linguistically unmotivated) and inevitable (linguistically motivated) changes may actually occur.

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[1] Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) did not mention the existence of secondary theme in English in their book.