

THEMATIC PROGRESSION OF STUDENTS' NARRATIVE WRITING

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ABSTRACT

This study is aimed to find the types of thematic progression of students' narrative writing and the way of theme and rheme was developed. The analysis is based on textual function of Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) by Halliday. The data of the study were 5 fictional narrative stories by third semester students of English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, University of HKBP Nommensen Medan. The findings show that most of the stories are categorized into zig-zag non-linear pattern. This indicates that the students in developing their writings were not consistent and need guidance in writing narrative text.

Key words: narrative, thematic progression, writing skills.

Introduction

Writing is one of language skills which needs strong efforts. The ability to write in-depth academic essays is widely regarded as one of the hallmarks of a higher education. So, when our students are asked to write, they find that the most difficult part of the writing task is starting the writing task itself. Students suffer from 'writers' block', awed by the fact that they have to write out their thoughts on a blank piece of paper. It is essential that most of university students are unable to write clearly about topics related to their study fields. Thus, choosing proper and appropriate words would help learners to convey their intended meaning. If, on the other hand, words are inappropriately and inaccurately selected, they lead to the confusion and segmentation of meaning. In the EFL writing setting, we find that learners often write compositions or essays that consist of sentences which are not connected together into a cohesive text. Yes, it is true that writing is difficult as it requires intense, active thinking throughout a continuous productive process in which thoughts and ideas are transferred into written communication, but not just words and letters on paper. However, in most cases, students "believe that writing is a natural gift rather than a learned skill" (Langan, 2000:12). They add that they do not have the talent of writing. As a result, these students do not write and do not try their best to do so. Nevertheless, it is claimed that writing can be mastered through practice, and all what it needs is special attention from both instructors and students. While ELT writing materials provide some focus on cohesive devices, little attention is paid to the progression of information in texts. The study focuses on the theme and rheme of the student's narrative writing. The types of thematic progression that students were used in their narrative writing assignment. The analysis on theme of the data uses systemic functional grammar approach proposed by Halliday (2004) regarding textual functions, with the emphasis on theme and rheme of the narrative text.

Problems of the Study

The problem of this study can be stated as follows.

1. What types of thematic progression are found in the student's narrative writing?
2. How is Theme and Rheme realized in the student's narrative writing?

Review of Related Literature

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Systemic functional linguistics, often called systemic functional grammar or systemic grammar (the functional is often omitted), is a grammar model developed by Halliday (1994) with his Introduction to Functional Grammar based on the model of language as social semiotics. According to Eggins (1994: 2) systemic functional linguistics is an approach to language which is centered on how people use language with each other in accomplishing everyday social life.

According to Halliday (1994: xiii) language is structured to make three kinds of meanings, or metafunctions, simultaneously: ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings. Ideational function deals with the way we express ideas to others, interpersonal is the way to exchange information, and textual functions is the way to organize the experience.

Halliday (1994:34) states that the significance of these three distinct functions in the clause is subject, actor and theme. Each of the three forms parts of a different functional configuration making up a separate strand in the overall meaning of the clause. Halliday (1994:34) defines these three different strands of meaning as follows:

1. The theme functions in the structure of the clause as a message. A clause has a meaning as a message, a quantum of information; the theme is the point of departure for the message. It is the element the speaker selects for "grounding" what he is going to say.
2. The subject functions in the structure of the clause as an exchange. A clause has a meaning as an exchange, a transaction between speaker and listener; the subject is the warranty of the exchange. It is the element the speaker makes responsible for the validity of what he is saying.
3. The actor functions in the structure of the clause as a representation. A clause has meaning as a representation, a construal of some processes in on going human experiences; the actor is the active participant in that process. It is the element the speaker portrays as the one that does the deed.

These three headings-clauses as a message, clause as an exchange and clauses as representation-refer to the three distinct kinds of meaning that are embodied in the structure of a clause. Theme, subject and actor do not occur as isolates; each occurs in association with other functions from the same strand of meaning. By separating out the functions of theme, subject and actor it is able to show that the clause is a composite entity. It is constituted not of one dimension of structure but of three, and each of three construes a distinctive meaning.

Theme and Rheme

"In English, where we put information in a clause tells us about where the clause is coming from and where it is going to" (Gerrot and Widgnell, 1994:102). In an English clause there are two points of prominence, the beginning and the end. The beginning of a clause is where we put information which links the clause to what has come before. Halliday (1994:30) defines theme as following.

The Theme can be identified as that element which comes in first position in the clause, and it is one element in a particular structural configuration which taken as a whole, organizes the clause as a message. Within that configuration, the Theme is starting-point for the message; it is the ground from which the clause is taking off.

Theme is, broadly speaking, what the clause is going to be about. Or in terms of Theme and Rheme, Theme represents 'This is what I'm talking about' and Rheme is 'This is what I'm saying about it'. In terms of looking at a clause as a message, the Theme looks backwards, relating the current message to what has gone before. The part in which the theme is developed is called the rheme The Rheme is also defined as the remainder of the message.

Types of Theme

Theme is divided into 3 categories: Ideational, Textual and Interpersonal (Gerot and Widgnell, 1994:104).

1. Ideational Themes

The ideational or topical Theme is usually but not always the first nominal group in the clause. It can be nominal group complexes, adverbial groups, prepositional phrases or embedded clauses. The subject is also the topical theme in the unmarked case, and it is called a marked topical theme if it is not the subject. The term marked is used because it stands out. It is not what we normally expect to find because it attracts attention.

1) Unmarked Topical Theme

a. Nominal group as Theme

Example:

John	wrote a letter
Theme	Rheme

b. Nominal group complex as Theme

Example:

Lily and Susan	wrote a letter
Theme	Rheme

c. Embedded clause

Example:

What he explained to you	was the fact
Theme	Rheme

2) Marked Topical Themes

a. Adverbial Theme

Away	the bird flew
Theme	Rheme

b. Prepositional phrase as Theme

Her sweater	she made
Theme	Rheme

The Topical Theme was extend and include the theme of a clause. Thematic are also elements which precede the topical theme, but that are not elements which come after the topical theme.

2. Textual Themes

Textual themes can be continuatives and/or conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions. The difference is that conjunctive adjuncts are more free to move in a clause whereas conjunctions adjuncts pretty well restricted to being at the beginning. Thus, in the example below, at the beginning at the second clause in each pair, the conjunction 'but' had remain, and in various positions in the clause the conjunctive adjunct 'nevertheless' can occurred.

- The procedure was simple
but, nevertheless was very effective.
- The procedure was simple
but was, nevertheless, very effective.
- The procedure was simple
but was very effective nevertheless.

Structural themes are conjunctions tend to provide textual themes within a clause complex. conjunctive adjuncts tend to (but don't always) join text outside of clause complexes. Continuatives are a small set of items which, if they are there, are always at the beginning of the clause and signal that a new move is beginning. For example:

Ok,	what we do	is clean our classroom
Cont.	Topical	Rheme
Theme		

They signal to the listeners that someone is about to start, resume or continue speaking related to the context of speaking. By providing a logical link between messages conjunctives related the clause to the preceding text.

Well	on the other hand	they	would come
Cont.	Conjunctive	Topical	Rheme
Theme			

A clause at the beginning and carry the logico-semantic relations between clauses always occurred almost conjunctions.

Well	on the other hand	if	they	come on Monday
Cont.	Conjunctive	Structural	Topical	Rheme
Theme				

3. Interpersonal Themes

Thematic are also the topical theme before occurring interpersonal elements. They may be modal adjuncts, vocatives, finite or WH-elements.

1) Modal adjunct

Maybe	we	must go home now
Modal	Topical	Rheme
Interper.		
Theme		

2) Vocatives

Vocatives (a name or nickname used to address someone) are only thematic if they occur before the topical theme, a finite verb or a modal adjunct.

Dearly beloved	we	are gathered here today
Vocative	Topical	Rheme
Theme		

John,	we	hoped to survive until tomorrow
Vocative	Topical	Rheme
Theme		

In the all clauses below the person's name is not used as a vocative; therefore it is topical and not interpersonal.

1. John hoped to survived until tomorrow.

John	hoped to survive until tomorrow
Topical	Rheme
Theme	

2. Anyway, John, we hoped to survive until tomorrow.

Anyway	John	we	hoped to survive until tomorrow
Cont.	Vocative	Topical	Rheme
Text.	Interp.	topical	
Theme			

3. John, didn't we hope to survive until tomorrow?

John	didn't	we	hoped to survive until tomorrow?
vocative	finite	topical	Rheme
Interp.		topical	
Theme			

4. But, John, surely we can hope until tomorrow

But	John	surely	we	can hope until tomorrow
Conj.	Voc.	Modal	Topical	Rheme
Text.	Interpersonal		Topical	
Theme				

The maximum possible theme in a clause would be something like:

5. Well, but alternatively John surely wouldn't the best thing be to survive.

Well	but	alternatively	John	surely	wouldn't	the best thing	be to survive
Cont.	Str.	Conj.	Voc.	Modal	finite	Topical	Rheme
Textual			Interpersonal			Topical	
Theme							

Thematic Development

One of the writers' tasks is to know how to hook the sentences together in a way that enables them to create a text with both unity of texture and unity of structure. Eggins (1994) believes that "the flow of information in a sentence from Theme to Rheme is important to convey the message effectively. The exchange of information between Theme and Rheme pairings in a text is called Thematic Progression" (in Wang, 2007: 168) Thematic progression, as understood by Daneš (1974), is the study of how Theme in a text is developed from clause to clause to build larger stretches. Eggins (1994) prefers to use Thematic development instead of Thematic progression. She states that the choice of Theme for any individual clause is generally related to the way information is being developed over the course of the whole text. Daneš (1974) presents three models of Thematic Progression. These are re-iteration, zigzag, and multiple patterns. (in Nikmah, 2010:18) McCabe (1999) modified the thematic progression scheme proposed by Daneš (ibid) and identified four main patterns of thematic progression: 'constant TP', 'linear TP', 'split theme TP', and 'split rheme progression' that might manifest differently in different genres. These thematic progression are: 1) Constant thematic progression: The theme of one clause is derived from the theme of the previous clause;

- T ---- R1
- T ---- R2
- T ---- R3

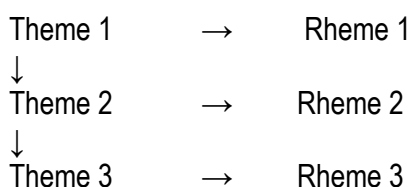
Table 2.1 Constant Thematic Progression

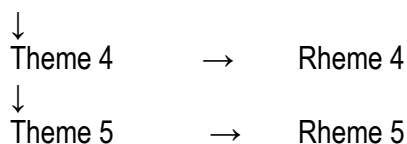
Theme	Rheme
Salim	was born in India
He	was very interstd in learning English
And (he)	always tried to practice his English
When he	was ten
He	could communicate with his foreign friends.

Readers and addressers need to be assured that they are following the development of the text. Many texts are signposted by placing elements from the rheme of one clause into the theme of the following clause, or by repeating meanings from the theme of one clause in the theme of subsequent clauses. This kind of text development is called thematic progression or thematic development. Thematic development refers to the way theme of a clause is developed. Theme of a clause may pick up or repeat a meaning from the preceding theme and rheme. According to Martin and Rother in Paltridge (2000: 140) as quoted by Mulatsih (2006), there are three kinds of thematic development patterns, i.e.

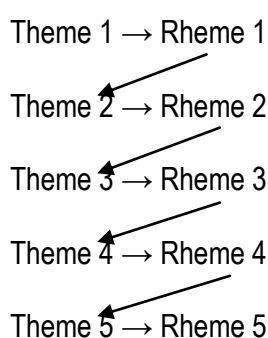
a. Theme reiteration / constant theme pattern.

This pattern shows that the first theme is picked up and repeated in the beginning of the next clause. The figure is as follows:

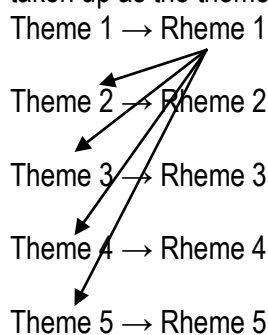


**b. A zig zag linear theme pattern**

It is a pattern when the subject matter in the rheme of one clause is taken up as the theme of the following clause. The figure of this pattern is as follows:

**c. Multiple theme / split rheme pattern**

In this pattern, a rheme may include a number of different pieces of information, each of which may be taken up as the theme in a number of subsequent clauses. The figure of this pattern is as follows:

**Method**

This study is descriptive and qualitative research. The descriptive research is research conducted to describe systematically the fact and the characteristic of given population or area of interest, faculty, and accurately. It describes the types of Theme of student's narrative writing. The qualitative research is a procedure of research, in which the collected data will not be created by statistic procedure. In this research, the collected data is often called 'soft data'. It usually reaches in people description that is also not easy done by statistic procedure. So this research is not only limited on collecting and arranging the data orderly, but also analyzing and interpreting the meaning of the data.

The unit of the analysis of this research was focused on every clause of narrative writing assigned in 'Narrative and Narrative Theory' subject that was taught in the third semester, in English Department, Faculty of Language and Arts, University of HKBP Nommensen. There were 5 fictional stories by the students containing the horror stories that they might ever experience or were based on their imaginary thingking.

Data of study is obtained by assigning the students of English Department, consisting of 27 students that were divided into 5 groups, to write a narrative horror in groups discussion. The topic of writing is given by the lecturer. The students are limited to time of completion, that is 90 minutes, with the length of assignment is around 250 to 350 words.

The steps in analysing the data are as follows :

1. Segmenting the sentences into Clauses.
2. Identifying the Theme and Rheme for each clause.
3. Determining the type of Theme and Rheme for each clause.
4. Make the categorization of the Theme and Rheme based on Thematic Progression types
5. Drawing conclusion.

4. Finding and Discussion

The research findings are revealed, after the data analysis above, as following:

4.1. Types of Thematic Progression

The types of thematic progression of the 5 narrative fictional stories by the third-semester students can be seen in the following table.

Table 4.1 The Findings

Text/Data	Thematic Progression	T-T	T-R	R-T	R-R	Σ	Clauses
A	Reiteration Theme Parttern	3	1	4	23	31	22
B	Zig-zag non-linear pattern	2	4	6	8	20	22
C	Zig-zag non-linear pattern	16	7	2	5	34	18
D	Zig-zag non-linear pattern	4	11	12	22	39	30
E	Zig-zag non-linear pattern	4	5	3	6	18	16
Total		29	28	27	64	142	108

The findings on table 4.7 show that text A is categorized into reiteration theme pattern which is dimiantly formed in R-R (23). The number of Theme-Rheme (31) is bigger than that of the clauses(22). Text B is developed in zig-zag non-linear pattern, and the number of the theme-rheme is 20 occurances, smaller than the number of the clauses. Data C consists of 34 thematic progressions, bigger than the number of the clauses. It is developed in zig-zag non-linear pattern. Data D is also developed in the same way as data C, in zig-zag non-linear pattern. The number of its them-rheme is bigger thant the number of its clauses. Eventual, data E is developed in the same way as data B, C, and D, zig-zag non-linear pattern, however the number of its theme-rheme constructions is almost the same as that of its clauses.

4.2 The Method of development

Most of the narrative stories, as the group-work of the students' project were developed in zig-zag non-linear pattern. The stories were developed in such way without giving a credit to the way a pragraph should be developed (Halliday, 2004, Danes, 1974). Based on the findings in table 4.2, data A, C, D, E, each has number of cohesive device them-rheme bigger than the number of the clauses, that is to say that these stories were quite cohesive. However the data B shows that the number of clauses is bigger than that of theme-rheme. This text is not tightly bound in thematic cohesiveness.

5. Conclusion

This research has uncovered the reality students are encountering in writing narrative text. The finding of the study shows that the students' narrative texts were developed in zig-zag non-linear pattern. In addition the number of the thematic progression types was dominated by Rheme – Rheme development. This indicates that the students have difficulties in developing the theme based on the three types of thematic progression. This leads to the incomprehensive understanding of the story contents.

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