Informativity and English Writing

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Abstract：This paper approaches English writing from a textual perspective· After reviewing the thematic theory and the information structure and their textual functions，the writer illustrates the application of them to practical writing with detailed analysis·

Key words：theme；rheme；given information；new information；writing

In recent years，although college students have acquired a high level of proficiency in English reading，they made comparatively very little progress in English writing· Though some students can write correct sentences，they are poor in organizing their sentences in the service of their general purpose· This paper approach writing from the textual perspective· Dressler et al think that there are some factors which greatly contribute to the texture of a text· It is our aim to discuss how two of these factors——thematic structure and information arrangement function in the text constitution and how these theories can be applied to English writing·

According to Dressler et al（1981），"informativity is a feature concerning the extent to which the occurrences of the presented text are expected vs· unexpected or known vs· unknown"· It is one of the seven textual features· Generally，people discuss the term "informativity" from two correlated structures：thematic structure and information organization·

1 The Theory of Thematic Structure

The pair of concepts may be illustrated with the following example：

（1）Mary passed the exam·

Based on Halliday's theory，in sentence（1），the theme is 'Mary' and the remaining part，i·e· 'passed the exam' of is Rheme·

In practice，the theory of theme—rheme structure is often applied to analyze the arrangement of the elements in clauses；in other words，it only concerns the linearization problem within clauses·

2 The Theory of Information Organization

Halliday believes that there are two categories of information：NEW information and GIVEN information；the former is "information that the addresser believes is not known to the addresser"；the latter refers to "the information which the addressor believes is known to the addressee（either because it is physically present in the context or because it has already been mentioned in the discourse）"（Brown et al，2000，154）.

As for the organization of the information，Halliday suggests，generally，given information will be ordered before new information，which is considered as the natural

and so 'unmarked' sequencing of information structure as this ordering agrees with the cognition process of human beings '——from the known to the unknown·

Halliday supposes in a written text, the way the words ordered, the way the words written (capitalization or bold type) and cohesive devices etc·——the exploitation of any one of which may serve to mark off which information the writer is treating as new and which treating as given·

3　The Relationship between the Thematic Structure and Information Structure

After reviewing the theory of thematic structure and that of information organization, we will continue with the discussion on the relationship between them as they are usually discussed together·

Halliday (2000) supposes, in a typical way, the given information and the theme are conflated, the new information mapped onto the rheme; however, he also recognizes that in some cases, to create the effect of contrast or emphasis or correction, the theme may be mapped on to new information·

4　The Textual Functions of the Two Structures and Their Application to Writing

After clarifying the relationship between the two systems／structures, we will transfer to their textual functions·

4.1　The Textual Functions of Thematic Structure

In 1, we discussed the theme—rheme organization within a clause; however, if the theme and rheme analysis remains restricted to the boundaries of the clause, it is unable to reveal the textual function of these elements within texts and it has little to do with our discussion about writing· We agree with Hatim et al· (2001, 217—218) when they argue："If theme—rheme analysis is to have any relevance to translators, it must provide an account of thematic progression in the service of particular rhetorical purposes·" Though they are arguing for the importance of thematic progression to translators, I think it is also of great importance for a writer to take into consideration thematic progression when s／he is writing as this opinion assumes a textual／perspective, and for a writer, s／he has to arrange his／her words in the service of the conveyance of his／her message·

The term 'thematic progression' "refers to the way subsequent discourse re—use previous themes or rhemes according to an overall text plan" (Hatim et al, 2001, 217—218)·

As for the patterns of the thematic progression, scholars home and abroad have offered different insights· Here, we cite the four patterns of the thematic progression (TP) generalized by Zhu (朱永生, 1995)：(T = Theme, R=Rheme)

$$A. T_1 \rightarrow R_1 \qquad\qquad B. T_1 \rightarrow R_1$$
$$T_2(=T_1) \rightarrow R_2 \qquad\qquad T_2 \rightarrow R_2(=R_1)$$
$$T_n(=T_1) \rightarrow R_n \qquad\qquad T_n \rightarrow R_n(=R_1)$$

$$C. T_1 \rightarrow R_1 \qquad\qquad D.\quad T_1 \rightarrow R_1$$
$$\parallel \qquad\qquad\qquad \parallel$$
$$T_2(=R_1) \rightarrow R_1 \qquad\qquad T_2 \rightarrow R_2(=T_1)$$
$$\parallel \qquad\qquad\qquad \parallel$$
$$T_n(=R_{n-1}) \qquad\qquad T_n \rightarrow R_n(=T_{n-1})$$

Zhu holds the four patterns may be enough to include all the thematic progression patterns, though the development of some texts may be a mixture of two or even more than two patterns, they can be interpreted within the frame of the four patterns·

Based on the discussion above, we believe when the writers sequence their words into sentences, they may choose the way that best expresses themselves· By re—using the previous themes or rhemes, the sentences hang together, that is the textual function of thematic progression· That is, by analyzing the thematic progression of a text, the text receiver／reader may have some clue to the producer's intention· In brief, as theme—rheme arrangement is exploited by the writer／speaker to serve his／her purpose, a text producer might not feel quite free to choose any frame to convey his／her message, s／he might at the same time try to select a sequencing which may well serve his／her purpose· To illustrate this, people will usually resort to a comparison between the active form of a sentence and its passive form·

For example：

(2a) Tom kicked the ball·

(2b) The ball was kicked by Tom·

Though the two sentences seem to mean the same in conceptual content, they have different communicative values as they suggest different contexts· Generally

speaking，the active sentence（2a）seems to be an answer to such a question "What did Tom kick?"，while the passive sentence（2b）seems to answer such a question "Who kicked the ball?" That means though the two sentences above have the same conceptual meaning，they are not equally appropriate within the same context. According to Leech，"Thematic meaning is mainly a matter of choice between alternative grammatical construction" (Leech，1974，19)

4.2 The Textual Functions of Information Organization

As we mentioned in 3，generally speaking，the organization of information in a clause tends to follow the pattern：Given—New，as this is natural and is in agreement with human's cognition process. In the development of a text，the writer will usually follow the rule，as，on the one hand，this ordering may contribute to the coherence and cohesion of the text in question；on the other hand，it may help to make easier the interpretation of the text as the given information can serve as a fulcrum on which new information is introduced.

Of course，in actual reading，we may often encounter marked information organization，that is：the new information is not arranged at the end of an information unit. The reason that the last element of a clause does not carry the information focus may be that the writer employed some cohesive devices which render this part of information recoverable or inferable，and the focus may be put somewhere else to achieve certain effect，for example，to achieve the effect of contrast，or，suspension or correction.

In the following we will discuss the application of the two theories to English writing. To clarify our opinion，we adapt a paragraph from Hu（2001）：

（3a）（a）Since its birth，language has been used as a most efficient instrument for human communication. (b) The functions of language have attracted the attention of a great number of scholars. (c) Though working assiduously，many of them did not figure out the true nature of language which is the aim of modern linguistics. (d) "Rhetoric" was the profound theory of language use they developed. (e) Their main interests at that time lay in finding some practical skills to make their use of language more effective. (f) We still are helped to the present

study by what they did centuries ago···

Every sentence in the above paragraph is correct and acceptable as far as grammar is concerned，and so is the order between the sentences. Yet，the sentences don't cohere even though they are centered on the same topic——language；besides，it seems that these sentences are not arranged naturally which makes the interpretation of the paragraph rather difficult. Detailed discussion on this paragraph is offered in the following：

Sentence (a) with "since its birth，language" as the theme，"a most efficient instrument for human communication" as the rheme. And in the theme，there is a topical theme "language"，which together with "since its birth" is given information，the remaining part of the sentence is new information. To make the message more clear to the reader，it is advisable to put the topical theme at the beginning of the sentence in question. The theme of (b) "the functions of language" is inferable information，that is，from the perspective of information flow，the rheme of (a) may naturally lead the reader to the theme of (b)，the two may be put close to each other. While (c) begins with new information，which results in the break of cohesion between (c) and (b)，to be exact，the cohesive tie between "scholars" and "many of them". However，if we put "many of them" at the beginning of (c) as given information，and "though working assiduously" as a separate information unit following "many of them". In (c)，there is also an element "which is the aim of modern linguistics"，which is irrelevant to all the other sentences，thus，for the coherence of the whole paragraph，this clause might be crossed out. And so the rheme "did not figure out the true nature of language" carries the information focus in the sentence. Likewise，"rhetoric"——new information in (d) is not suitable for the subject of this clause；so it is better if we choose "one of the profound theories of language use they developed" to be subject here as it can be inferred from the rheme of (c). The relationship between (d) and (e) is not obvious even though personal reference is exploited to show their underlying cohesive relation. In face here，between them，there lies another relationship——effect——cause relationship，which helps make these sentences hang together and make the paragraph more compact and coherent. In sentence (f)，the given information "what

they did centuries ago" is put at the end of the sentence, where generally lies the information focus, which obviously is not justified here. To make this sentence more acceptable in this very context, we may follow the general rule to arrange the information in this clause, i. e. from the given to the new.

Taking into consideration the information flow and the thematic structure of the paragraph above, we may rewrite it as the following:

(3b) (a') Language has been used, since its birth, as a most efficient instrument for human communication. (b') The functions of language have attracted the attention of a great number of scholars. (c') Many of them, though working assiduously, did not figure out the true nature of language. (d') One of the profound theories of language use they developed was "Rhetoric". (e') This is because their main interests at that time lay only in finding some practical skills to make their use of language more effective. (f') What they did centuries ago is still helpful in our present study···

To conclude, the development of writing skills is a complex and dynamic cognitive process. It requires more than the mastery of vocabulary and sentence structure. We have to at the same time take into account some suprasentential factors to sequence our words reasonably to achieve the effect we expect.

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信息性与关语写作

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摘要:《语篇角度探讨英语写作.作者首先阐述了主述位理论与信息分布理论及它们的语篇功能,接着用语篇实例,详细地分析如何应用上述两个理论来指导具体的英语写作.

关　键　词:主位;述位;已知信息;新信息;写作