

Analysis of Theme and Thematic Progression in Expository Texts

-- A Case Study Based on NCEE Reading Materials

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Abstract: Effective lesson planning and execution are ensured by deep text interpretation. The New English Curriculum reform currently places greater demands on students' ability to read at a deep level, which raises the bar for fully evaluating the arrangement and structure of textual content. The focus of modern text linguistics, the theme-rheme theory and thematic progression pattern, play a significant role in interpreting textual composition and internal information structure of a discourse. Therefore, in order to increase the explanatory power in textual analysis, this study tries to apply theme-rheme theory and thematic progression to analyze the textual organization characteristics of expositions in National College Entrance Examination(NCEE) Volume A reading materials. Finally, this study gives the front-line teachers some reference based on the findings in order to improve their text interpretation, reading, and writing instruction, which will ultimately support effective teaching design and implementation.

Keywords: Theme-rheme Theory; Thematic Progression Pattern; National College Entrance Examination (NCEE); Expositions.

1. Introduction

The first stage in teaching reading is text interpretation. Teachers need to improve their ability to understand texts if they want to increase the quality of students' learning and the effectiveness of classroom instruction (Wang, 2015:7). According to the National English Curriculum Standard (2022), deep text interpretation can help teachers analyze textual information from a variety of perspectives before designing the appropriate instructional activities to improve students' deep learning. According to He & Zhang (2016), "textual content interpretation contributes to more comprehension about the textual theme." In contemporary linguistics, the theme-rheme theory and thematic progression pattern have received a lot of attention. Both of them are applied to describe textual construction and textual decoding of reading materials, which will provide teachers with some help for interpreting textual structure and information organization.

In addition, the NECS amended in 2022 also states that five fundamental skills for students--listening, speaking, reading, writing, and viewing. It places more emphasis on enhancing students' textual comprehension, including how specific texts are constructed, how to convey semantic information, how to use cohesive devices, etc., all of which can enhance their ability to understand textual material effectively. In addition, this study chooses reading materials from NCEE (Volume A) due to the high reliability and validity of the examination. And the reading materials in NCEE (Volume A) are mostly expository texts.

Given these facts, this study examines the types and distribution of theme and thematic progression patterns in expository texts by analyzing reading materials from NCEE (Volume A) over the period of 2021 and 2023 based on theme-rheme theory and thematic progression patterns, hoping that it will ultimately help students develop deep reading comprehension.

2. Theoretical Review

2.1. Theme and Rheme

Theme and rheme is first proposed by Henri Weil (1844). He holds the idea that every discourse consists of two parts: departure point and discourse goal. The departure point is the information that is already known by the speaker and the hearer, and the discourse goal is the new information which is supposed to convey to the hearer by the speaker.

After that, theme and rheme has been studied by the scholars of Prague School. In 1939, the founder of Prague School, Mathesius, is the first one who proposes the concepts of theme and rheme. He defines theme as "the starting point of the utterance" (Firbas, 1976:11) and points out that these two concepts can be useful in the research of the effects of different elements of a sentence in verbal communication. He finds that element situated at the beginning of the sentence played a vital role in the process of communication. The initial element acted as the point of departure is theme, and the rest part of the sentence is rheme.

In the 1960s, Halliday developed the concepts of theme and rheme based on the previous study. He gives a clear definition of theme and rheme in his book *An Introduction of Functional Grammar*. In his view, the theme usually expresses information that is already known and the rheme usually shows new information. According to Halliday, theme is the departure point of the information and the part which the clause is talking about, and the rest part of the clause is rheme which advances the theme forward.

2.2. Classification of Theme

According to Halliday's book *An Introduction of Functional Grammar*, theme can be classified into several types based on its function, complexity and markedness. In terms of its function and complexity, Halliday (2000:39) divides the theme into groups: simple theme, multiple theme

and clausal theme.

2.2.1. Simple Theme

Halliday (2000:39)concluded that the simple theme contains only one functional element and cannot be divided further. The simple theme has only one unit whether it is composed of one or more than one word, which might be a prepositional group, an adverbial group and a nominal group.

2.2.2. Multiple Theme

Multiple theme refers to the theme which has complex internal structure and can be divided further according to the function of the clause. According to Halliday(2004:43), multiple theme consists of three elements, namely topical element, interpersonal element and textual element. Themes with these elements are respectively called topical theme, interpersonal theme and textual theme. In Halliday’s view, “topical theme is the start point of an expression and it can be represented by a nominal group, an adverbial group or a prepositional group; interpersonal theme shows the attitude or emotion of the speaker; textual theme relates the clause to its context.”(Halliday, 2004:51). The textual theme is usually in front of interpersonal theme which is followed by topical theme.

2.2.3. Clausal Theme

Halliday (2004:45) defines that the clausal theme is the theme marked with a subordinate clause. It consists of non-predicate with the form like “-ed”, “-ing” or other forms, as well as subordinate clause with the forms like “wh-” clause, “if-” clause or “there-be” pattern.

2.3. Thematic Progression Patterns

The concept of thematic progression was first proposed by F. Danes, a Czech linguist from the Prague school. According to Danes (1974), thematic progression serves as the framework for the construct of the information in a text. On the basis of sufficient linguistic resources, he initially put forth the three typical patterns of thematic progression: simple linear progression, constant thematic progression and derived thematic progression. Van Dijk (1977) advanced the chain pattern and parallel pattern after Danes. Then Bloor (2001) proposed four patterns: the derived theme pattern, the split theme pattern, the linear theme pattern, and the continuous

theme pattern.

Thematic progression was also a topic that Chinese linguists explored extensively, and they suggested their own TP patterns. The four typical patterns of thematic progression—parallel pattern, simple linear pattern, focused pattern, and crossed pattern—were initially proposed by Xu Shenghuan in 1982. Theme progression was categorized into different categories by other academics as well, although no new patterns were suggested. There are six different types of theme progression, according to Huang Guowen (1988), including parallel, continuous, concentrated, crossing, parallel, and derived theme progression. In 1992, Li Zhanzi identified three fundamental types of theme progression:simple linear, parallel and derived theme progression. Hu Zhuanglin (2005) introduced four common patterns of theme progression: constant theme, constant rheme, simple linear and crossing.

Based on enough language materials, the six most prevalent types of thematic progression from F. Danes’s, Xu’s, and Huang’s classification will therefore be used in this study in order to clearly analyze the characteristics of textual organization in expository texts: parallel pattern, concentrated pattern, continuous theme pattern, simple linear pattern, crossed pattern, derived theme or rheme pattern.

3. Results and Discussion

The study collected the reading materials in NCEE(Volume A) from 2021 to 2023 so as to analyze the distribution features of theme type and thematic progression patterns in expository texts. For the purpose of trying to provide a clearer explanation in the data analysis, and relevant examples taken from the text materials will be given.

3.1. Analysis of Theme Types in Expositions

There are four expositions in the gathered reading texts from NCEE (Volume A), it was discovered through the reading texts collection. The study summarized the distribution and proportion of simple, multiple and clausal theme in 4 expository text samples from reading materials of NCEE Year 2021to Year 2023. The following table displays the findings:

Table 1. The Distribution of Theme Types in 4 Expositions

Text Theme Type	Year2023 Text D	Year2022 Text B	Year2021 Text B	Year2021 Text D	Total	Percentage (%)
simple theme	9	9	8	8	34	60.714
multiple theme	2	0	1	8	11	19.643
clausal theme	4	2	2	3	11	19.643
Total	15	11	11	19	56	100

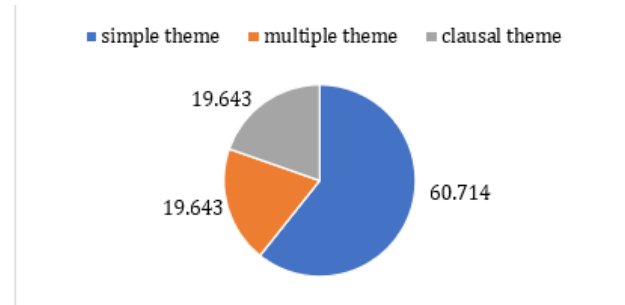


Fig 1. The Proportion of Theme Types

Based on the data provided, it can be observed that the simple theme is the dominant theme type in the four expository text samples and as a whole across all four samples, and its distribution in expository text samples is evenly spread out each year. Overall, the simple theme accounts for 60.714% of the themes, making it the largest proportion, followed by clausal theme at 19.643%. And the percent of multiple themes is equal to that of clausal theme. To illustrate the theme types in expository text clearly, the study has chosen a sample from Text D in Year 2023 as an example to demonstrate the process of theme types.

Text Sample 1(Year 2023 Text D):

Grizzly bears(T1), which may grow to about 2.5m long and weigh over 400kg, occupy a conflicted corner of the American psyche — we revere them even as they give us frightening dreams. Ask the tourists from around the world that flood into Yellowstone National Park what they most hope to see (T2), and their answer is often the same: a grizzly bear.

“Grizzly bears(T3) are re-occupying large areas of their former range,” says bear biologist Chris Servheen. As grizzly bears expand their range into places where they haven’t been seen in a century or more(T4), they’re increasingly being sighted by humans.

The western half of the U.S. (T5) was full of grizzlies when Europeans came, with a rough number of 50,000 or more living alongside Native Americans. By the early 1970s, after centuries of cruel and continuous hunting by settlers(T6), 600 to 800 grizzlies remained on a mere 2 percent of their former range in the Northern Rockies. In 1975(T7), grizzlies were

listed under the Endangered Species Act.

Today, there are(T8) about 2,000 or more grizzly bears in the U.S. Their recovery(T9) has been so successful that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has twice attempted to delist grizzlies, which would loosen legal protections and allow them to be hunted. Both efforts(T10) were overturned due to lawsuits from conservation groups. For now(T11), grizzlies remain listed.

Obviously, if precaution(T12) aren’t take, grizzlies can become troublesome, sometimes killing farm animals or walking through yards in search of food. If people remove food and attractants from their yards and campsites(T13), grizzlies will typically pass by without trouble. Putting electric fencing around chicken houses and other farm animal quarters(T14) is also highly effective at getting grizzlies away. “Our hope is to have a clean, attractant-free place(T15) where bears can pass through without learning bad habits,” says James Jonkel, longtime biologist who manages bears in and around Missoula.

Table 2. Distribution of Theme Types in Text Sample 1

Paragraph	Theme	Theme Type	Paragraph	Theme	Theme Type
Para. 1	T1	simple theme (single group)	Para. 5	T12	multiple theme (interpersonal+textual +topical element)
	T2	clausal theme (compound clause)		T13	clausal theme (dependent clause)
Para. 2	T3	simple theme (single group)		T14	simple theme (nominalization)
	T4	clausal theme (dependent clause)		T15	clausal theme (dependent clause)
Para. 3	T5	simple theme (single group)			
	T6	simple theme (group complex)			
	T7	simple theme (single group)			
Para. 4	T8	multiple theme (textual+topical element)			
	T9	simple theme (single group)			
	T10	simple theme (single group)			
	T11	simple theme (single group)			

As is shown above, there are a total of 9 simple themes, 2 multiple themes, and 4 clausal themes.

In the first two paragraphs, 1 compound clause, 1 dependent clause and 2 single group theme sub-types are presented to provide the background information about the major topic-Grizzly bears. The content from T5 to T11, which includes 1 group complex theme sub-type, one textual+topical theme sub-type and 5 single group theme sub-types, which show the change in the number of grizzly bears in chronological order by citing data. Lastly, T12, T13, T14, and T15, which include 1 nominalization, 2 dependent clauses and

1 interpersonal +textual+ topical theme sub-types. Moreover, T12 is used to introduce the last minor topic, and the last three themes can be seen as components of T12. They are combined to provide suggestions on how humans can live in harmony with grizzly bears.

3.2. Analysis of Thematic Progression Patterns in Expositions

This study analyzes the thematic progression patterns in each text and assess the impact of these distribution characteristics on the text structure. The proportion of each

pattern can be shown in the following table.

Table 3. The Distribution of TP Patterns in 4 Expositions (TP=Thematic Progression)

Text TP Patterns	Year 2023 Text D	Year 2022 Text B	Year 2021 Text B	Year 2021 Text D	Total	Percentage (%)
Parallel	2	2	3	2	9	20.000
Concentrated	2	2	1	3	8	17.778
Continuous	2	0	3	0	5	11.111
Simple linear	4	6	2	4	16	35.556
Crossed	1	2	2	1	6	13.333
Derived	0	0	1	0	1	2.222
Total	11	12	12	10	45	100

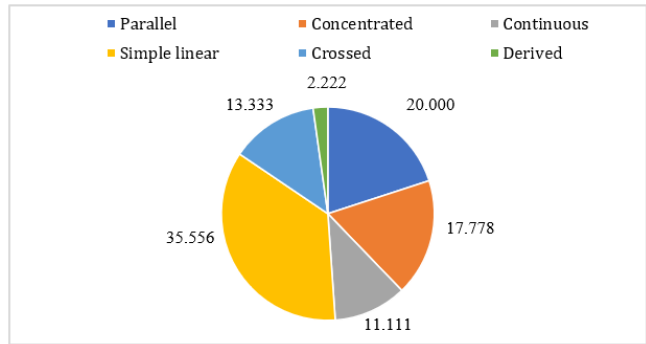


Fig 2. The Distribution of TP Patterns in 4 Expositions

As demonstrated above, it illustrates that some thematic progression patterns in expositions might not be utilized consistently. Among the six TP patterns, simple linear pattern, parallel pattern and concentrated pattern are more widely distributed and make up a larger proportion. Simple linear pattern tends to have the highest distribution in each sample (35.556%), followed by parallel pattern as the second largest(20%), and then concentrated pattern(17.778%). These three patterns are considered essential in expositions. Additionally, crossed pattern and continuous theme pattern have some presence in half of the text samples but with a relatively smaller proportion, which take up 13.333% and 11.111% respectively. On the other hand, derived rheme pattern has the least distribution among all patterns mentioned.

To provide a clearer explanation of the connection between TP patterns and the structural organization of expository texts, the Text D in Year 2023 NCEE (Volume A) will be chosen as the example once more. The following content portrays the associations between themes and rhemes within this specific sample.

The graph shows the specific distribution of different types of thematic progression patterns in 2023 NCEE (Volume A) Text D. It is clear that the passage involves 2 simple linear patterns, 2 parallel patterns, 2 concentrated patterns, 2 continuous patterns, and 1 crossed pattern. The concentrated pattern presented in the whole passage which emphasizes the same rhemes associated with the grizzly bears. The first continuous pattern, spanning paragraphs 2 and 3, is employed to review the downward trend in grizzly bear population since the arrival of Europeans in America. In paragraph 4, two simple linear patterns are used to illustrate the rebound of bears population after they were listed as protected species. Additionally, the parallel pattern followed by another continuous pattern, aiming to urge people to live in peace with grizzly bears.

Theme	Rheme	Thematic Progression
T1	R1	T1=R2 (crossed)
T2	R2	R2=T3=T4 (simple linear /continuous)
T3	R3	
T4	R4	T3=T4(parallel)
T5	R5	R1=R2=R3=R4=R5= R6=R7=R8=R9=R10 (concentrated)
T6	R6	
T7	R7	
T8	R8	R8=T9(simple linear)
T9	R9	R9=T10(simple linear)
T10	R10	
T11	R11	R12=T13=T14 (simple linear/ continuous)
T12	R12	
T13	R13	T12=T13=T14(parallel)
T14	R14	
T15	R15	R11=R12=R13=R14 =R15(concentrated)

Fig 3. The Thematic Progression Pattern in Year 2023 Text D

4. Conclusion

4.1. Major Findings

This paper mainly studies the distribution of theme types and application of thematic progression in expository text materials from NCEE (Volume A) over the period of 2021 and 2023, trying to find out some regular characteristics among the expositions.

In the collected expository texts, various theme types contribute to the overall composition. This study reveals that among these theme types, simple themes and clausal themes play dominant roles. And simple themes represent the largest portion of these text types, highlighting the importance of providing concise thematic information, which reflects that expository texts specifically accentuate the use of explanatory devices such as exemplifications and logical relationships.

Additionally, each expository text in NCEE (Volume A) over the period from 2021 to 2023 consists of a mixture of different thematic progression patterns. However, the distribution of these TP patterns varies across individual texts. In all the expositions, there is a frequent utilization of simple linear pattern, parallel pattern, and concentrated pattern to

facilitate the delivery of information. On the contrary, the continuous theme pattern and crossed pattern are employed sporadically or infrequently in these contexts, which prompts researchers to recognize the significance of pattern selection and distribution as essential factors in shaping the expository nature of a text.

4.2. Implications for English Language Teaching

4.2.1. Implications for Teaching Reading

Themes and thematic progression patterns play a crucial role in English reading teaching, enabling teachers to enhance their students' reading proficiency. The initial stage of teaching involves text interpretation, where teachers should grasp the fundamental concepts of theme and rheme, as well as TP patterns and their analytical components. By evaluating the structure of textual information through analyzing topic types and TP patterns used within the text, teachers can develop educational objectives tailored to individual needs.

To cultivate awareness regarding textual information structuring among students during different stages, instructional activities are recommended. In the pre-reading stage, techniques like introducing background information or engaging in prediction exercises to foster students' interest in reading while enhancing schema knowledge related to theme understanding. During while-reading activities, it is important for teachers to guide students on interpreting themes from introductory paragraphs or identifying referential relationships between themes that contribute towards summarizing key ideas within a given passage. Moreover, detecting connections between themes and rhemes at paragraph boundaries facilitates dividing the text into coherent sections. Finally, in post-reading tasks like rewriting content or continuing writing based on comprehension ensures that students develop solid skills for constructing effective textual structures under teachers' supervision.

4.2.2. Implications for Teaching Writing

Reading and writing are closely connected, and the ability to comprehend written material greatly benefits English writing skills. However, English writing instruction is often lacking, resulting in students' slower development of writing abilities compared to other language skills. Outlining serves as a crucial part of the writing process in English, as it creates a framework that includes various elements such as background information, subtopics, turning points, climax, summary, and sublimation. Teachers play a critical role in guiding students to design the framework of these components.

During the editing stage, teachers should actively encourage students to revise their drafts and incorporate more suitable themes and thematic progression patterns. Furthermore, peers or group members can provide valuable suggestions regarding the design of the framework and the effective use of themes and thematic progression patterns, which ultimately enhances the overall coherence and expressiveness of the text. In the evaluation stage, teachers can pick the exemplary compositions as models to assess students' strengths in their textual construction as well as

provide them with constructive suggestions during the peer-editing process. Furthermore, teachers should take the lead in guiding the entire class in refining the organization of their texts by rearranging and modifying the theme types and thematic progression patterns, thereby enhancing the overall quality of their writing.

4.3. Limitations and Prospect

In general, this study contains detailed instructions and has offered pertinent data proof to strengthen the results. However, there are still certain subjective and objective restrictions. For one thing, due to a small number of subjective and objective criteria, the sample size is insufficient. For another thing, the text samples are different in length. As a result, it is one of the major study limitations that may have a detrimental impact on the accuracy of the study.

Therefore, it will be better if the analysis is applied on more text samples from National College Entrance Examination English Test (Volume A) to have various results and to explore if it gives similar or different results from the current study. Besides, the samples selected for textual analysis had better be in uniform criterion in order to increase the precision and impact of the findings.

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