Thematic Progression Theory and Discourse Translation: A Case Study of *The Gift of the Magi*

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Abstract

In recent years, the Systemic Functional Grammar has long been viewed as providing a powerful framework for discourse analysis, in which thematic structure, information structure and cohesion are three key tools to realize the textual meta-function. Meanwhile, the emergence of thematic theory and thematic progression theory (TP theory) has attracted great attention in linguistics. TP theory has been thought of as a potentially analytic mean for decomposing discourses in translation. This paper spares no efforts to present the practical values of thematic progression in discourse translation by analyzing a short story, *The Gift of the Magi,* by O·Henry and its Chinese version translated by Wang Yongnian, a famous and prestigious translator, based on the thematic theory and TP theory respectively proposed by Halliday and Danes, and thus giving some hints to E-C short stories' translation.

Key words: Thematic theory; Thematic progression; Discourse translation

INTRODUCTION

With the development of discourse linguistics and its application into translation studies, discourse has gradually become the focus of translation practices and translation studies. Among the so many discourse elements mentioned by Halliday, structural discourse features (the theme structure and the information structure) are particularly important for the efficient transmission of information. "Many scholars have explored the application of the theme in translation studies, which is an important concept in describing the structure of clauses in the context of discourse, and whose existence is based on clauses."(Zhang, 2011), but translators need to come face to face with discourses, not just separate sentences. Therefore, in translation studies, if we only stay in analyzing the theme and rheme of each static and isolated clause, without considering the progress of the themes and rhemes in the composition of the discourse to present information orderly, it is tantamount to regarding a lonely clause as a translation unit, which is lacking practical guidance values to discourse translation.

Since the information carried by the clauses in a discourse is continually moving forward and developing without an end, and then forming the paragraphs and chapters, the study of translation from the discourse' perspective must take into account thematic progression patterns (TP patterns) and the resulting organization structures, which embody the coherence and dynamics of discourses. With all above-mentioned factors, this paper will explore the translation strategies adopted by Wang Yongnian to achieve equivalence in the target text from TP theory's perspective, thus benefiting the E-C translation of short stories.

1. THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

1.1 Thematic Theory

Thematic theory was raised by Halliday, and this paper will adopt it to identify the theme and rheme for laying a solid foundation to reveal the relationships between themes and rhemes among clauses in the source text (ST) and the target text (TT).

1.1.1 The Definition of Theme and Rheme

The two notions of theme and rheme were first put forward by Czech linguist Vilem Mathesius, the founder of Prague School, in an article *On Functional Sentence Perspective* in 1939. He noticed that every sentence from the viewpoint of its communicative functions can be divided into two semantic components: theme and rheme.

M.A.K. Halliday accepted and meanwhile further developed this idea. He named it the thematic theory. He identified the theme in a clause considering its function of organizing information and considered: "The theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is with which that the clause is concerned. The remainder of the message, the part in which the theme is developed, is called the rheme." (Halliday, 2000:37)

This paper will mainly adopt Halliday's definition to analyse the E-C translation of *The Gift of Magi*.

1.1.2 The Classification of Theme

Halliday contributed a lot to the classification of themes according to the thematic theory. His classification holds authority. In 1985, Halliday divided themes into three types: simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme in *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

Simple Theme. Simple theme refers to the theme that only consists of an ideational component, without any interpersonal or textual components. In other words, a simple theme is just composed of one structural element and that element is shown by just one unit. The unit can be shown by a nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase, such as, *"Our days(T) go by never to return(R)."* and *"At the foot of the wall (T) lies a broken flower vase(R)."* Apart from that, a theme consisting of two or more groups or phrases that produce a single structural element can still be considered a simple theme. The clause*"Both students and teachers(T) enjoy playing basketball in this school(R)."* is with two nominal groups as a simple theme of the clause. (with"T"representing the theme and"R"representing the rheme).

Multiple Theme. Multiple theme refers to a theme that contains at least two structural elements. The multiple theme is probably represented by three elements, namely, the textual theme, the interpersonal theme and the ideational theme. "However, whether two or three themes, there must exist an ideational theme, which is indispensable." (Halliday, 2000, pp. 70-74). The typical ordering of the multiple theme is textual theme ^ interpersonal theme ^ ideational theme.("^" means

"followed by"). The theme of the clause *"But, you see, Kelly, bargaining (T) also needs patience(R)."* is a typical multiple theme, with three structure components."But"is the textual theme (a structural component);"you see"and "Kelly"are the interpersonal themes (two vocative components); and "bargaining" is the ideational theme.

Clausal Theme. Clausal theme refers to a theme that is a whole clause. It takes efforts to analyze the thematic structure in a clause complex. Thus, to solve this problem, Halliday put forward two concepts, the dominant clause and the subordinate clause. If the subordinate clause lies in front of the dominant clause, the dependent clause functions as the theme of the whole clause complex. Hence the appearance of clausal theme, such as *"If you go away now,(T) I will never forgive you(R)."* Besides, each clause in the clause complex can be further analyzed thematically. What's more, if the dominant clause is put ahead, the theme of it is regarded as the theme of the clause complex, such as *"I (T)will never forgive you if you go away now.(R)"*.

1.2 TP Patterns

Themes and rhemes in a text may interact and form certain sorts of patterns in many ways. From this perspective, Czech linguist F. Danes made researches on the complex thematic relations within a discourse and later termed them as "thematic progression pattern."He is also the first one identifying four main TP patterns: Simple Linear pattern, Constant Theme pattern, Derived Themes Pattern, and Split Rheme pattern. In this paper, the author will introduce seven commonly used types.

Linear Theme Pattern. Linear theme pattern means that the rheme or the part of it in the former clause becomes the theme for the next clause. The development of this type resembles chains. The short discourse--*I (T1) have been to Paris (R1). It (T2)'s really too much of a bustling town (R2). The town (T3) virtually lack quiet and still open space for people to wander about and breathe freely (R3)*--gives an excellent explanation towards it. It is obvious that the part of the rheme of the first clause "Paris"is equal to"it", the theme of the subsequent clause. Likewise, the third clause's theme "the town" is equal to the rheme of the former clause "a bustling town".

Constant Theme Pattern. Constant theme pattern refers to that the clauses have the same theme but different rhemes. The three clauses--*A fighter (T1) is perennially young. He (T2) is never irresolute or inactive. He (T3) will never lose his youthful vigor.*--take the subjects"he"as the theme, which directly describes a fighter's characters and greatness at a sitting.

Derived Theme Pattern. Derived theme pattern means the theme in a clause may derive from either the theme or rheme of its previous clause. The discourse--*A scene of ten years ago (T1) slowly unfolded before my mind's eye. Rainwater (T2) was falling onto my clothes. Bubbles in puddles of rainwater (T3) were whirling about*

*like mad. The wheat fields (T4) presented a picturesque scene of vivid yellow.--*clearly shows that T2, T3, T4 are derived from the first theme,"A scene". Those themes are a part of the first theme.

Constant Rheme Pattern. "In this pattern, a group of clauses has the same rheme but with different themes, which is quite opposite to constant theme" (Huang, 1985, p. 33). The rhemes of the clauses, *Father (T1) continued, "So you must take after peanuts, because they are useful though not great and nice-looking" (R1). I (T2) said, "Then you meaning one should be useful rather than great and nice-looking" (R2).,* both refer to"one should be useful rather than great and nice-looking", though they are with different word orderings.

Combined pattern. Hu Zhuanglin put forward this pattern (Hu, 2005, p. 146). In this pattern, the theme and rheme of the prior clause together produce a theme of the subsequent clause. The clauses below apparently adopt the combined pattern, *This (T1) was the first time that I had been out to the town (R1). That (T2) accounted for my legs feeling so weak and my eyes being so shy of light.*

Alternative pattern. In this pattern, the theme of a clause is the rheme of the following clause. Most discourses will use this pattern to avoid monotony.

Split Rheme Pattern. In this pattern, the rheme of a clause in turn can be used as the themes of the following clauses.

2. THE APPLICATION OF TP PATTERNS IN DISCOURSE TRANSLATION

This part employs both quantitative and qualitative analyses based on collected data. The quantitative study is conducted to find out distribution of themes and TP patterns in the ST and the TT, while the qualitative analysis is used to explain those differences and similarities between the ST and the TT.

2.1 Quantitative Analysis

The sample short story, *The Gift of the Magi,* by O·Henry and its Chinese version by Wang Yongnian will be analysed here, and then show the comparison of TP patterns in the TT and the ST to get some hints towards E-C short stories' translation. The statistics is shown below in a chart.

Table 1
Distribution of TP Patterns in the TT and ST

Language/ TP Pattern	TT		ST	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
The Constant Theme Pattern	34	28.5%	33	38.0%
The Constant Rheme Pattern	19	16.0%	12	12.8%
The Linear Theme Pattern	31	26.1%	22	25.3%
The Split Rheme Pattern	4	3.4%	2	2.3%
The Derived Theme Pattern	16	13.4%	7	8.0%
The Combined Pattern	4	3.4%	3	3.4%
The Alternative Pattern	11	9.2%	8	9.2%
Total	119	100%	87	100%

There are 87 English TP patterns and 119 Chinese TP patterns in total. The proportion of TP patterns in the ST text is like this: the constant theme pattern (28.5%) >the linear theme pattern (26.1%) > the constant rheme pattern (16.0%) > the derived theme pattern (13.4%) > the alternative pattern (9.2%)> the combined pattern (3.4%) =the split rheme pattern (3.4%). While the proportion of TP patterns in Chinese fable texts goes like this: the constant theme pattern (38.0%) > the linear theme pattern (25.3%)>the constant rheme pattern (12.8%)>the alternative pattern(9.2) >the derived theme pattern (8.0%) > the combined pattern (3.4%)> the split rheme pattern (2.3%).

It is clear that the linear pattern and the constant theme pattern are chosen as major thematic devices in both the English and Chinese texts. The split rheme pattern takes up the least part, with the percentage of 3.4% and 2.3% in the TT and ST respectively. Also, the combined pattern shares the least in the proportion, with the percentage of 3.4% and 3.4% in the two texts. The constant rheme

pattern both comes to the third one in the proportion. However, the derived pattern takes a higher proportion in the TT than in the ST. Also, the percentage of the constant theme pattern in the ST is much higher than that in the TT.

2.2 Qualitative Analysis

The quantitative analysis of TP patterns above shows that there are some similarities as well as differences between the two texts. The similarities are as follows.

Firstly, statistics above show that the dominant patterns in both the ST and TT are the linear pattern and the constant theme pattern, with 25.3% and 38.0% respectively in the ST as opposed to 26.1% and 28.5% respectively in the TT.

This is mainly due to the genre of the discourse. The linear pattern is like a knitted thread which connects a series of clauses together. It can facilitate discourse cohesion and display the logicality of the discourse. As short stories emphasize lessons of life by telling stories, it is no wonder that linear patterns are frequently used. What's more, the frequent use of the constant theme

pattern also is influenced by the genre of the texts. Short stories are with specific things and time as the starting point, and tend to use the constant theme pattern to focus on specific things and time. Through the progression from the same theme to different rhemes, the topic can be talked about from various aspects and it is more easier to leave a deep impression on readers and to grasp the main plot of stories. Thus, it is undoubtedly that the constant theme pattern takes a big part in the texts.

Secondly, the combined pattern and the split rheme pattern are much less used both in the TT and the ST. In the TT, the split rheme pattern and the combined pattern occupy 3.4% and 3.4%, while in the ST they are 2.3% and 3.4% respectively.

The less use of these TP patterns is mainly due to the factor of readers. As short stories are especially for teenagers or the less-advanced English learners, they should agree with their cognitive ability. The reading feeling of these young readers is based on physical sensation and pleasure. In the aspect of psychology, their emotion, temperament, personality, motivation, interest, and faith are both in an immature state of development. It is the immature state of mind that leads to their disability in the reception of complicated literary works. In the aspect of society, because of their young age, they have little contact with the society. Hence, they lack the knowledge of culture, society and life. Thus, the smooth and the easy language is a prerequisite for them to enjoying the meaningful short stories. So the combined pattern and the split rheme pattern are much less used for they can't facilitate readers' understandings.

Besides similarities, there are also some differences of TP patterns between the two texts, mainly in the linear theme pattern and the constant theme pattern.

In the above quantitative analysis, the constant theme pattern takes up 38.0% in the ST while that of the TT occupies 28.5%. The linear pattern occupies 25.3% in the ST and 26.1% in the TT respectively. In a word, more constant theme patterns appear in the ST and more linear theme patterns are used in Chinese fables.

This can be explained from different culture differences of western and Chinese people. Individuality and rationality are two major concerns for westerners. On the contrary, influenced by traditional culture and philosophy, Chinese people attach greater importance to "unity when understanding the world." These cultural differences will undoubtedly influence language we use. English and Chinese have different syntactic features. English is hypotactic while Chinese is paratactic. In English, clauses are united as a whole with the help of lexical devices while in Chinese they are combined semantically, thus they will differ in the use of constant theme patterns and linear theme patterns.

2.3 Translation Strategies

In order to know the intentions of writers, that is to say, to understand how they develop their ideas and how they put the clauses together and organize them, it is crucial for translators to analyze the TP patterns of English sentence groups, and then organize new clauses to achieve equivalence. If TTs can preserve the original TP pattern naturally, the translators had better preserve it; if TTs cannot do that, the translators should adjust it.

2.3.1 Maintaining Original TP Patterns

From the comparative analyses of the short story, we can see that when the TP pattern in English sentence groups can be placed in Chinese sentence group naturally and easily, the translators are supposed to preserve it. This means the Chinese sentence group not only uses the original pattern to express the information clearly but also meets Chinese reading habits and logic. Usually, the constant theme pattern and the linear theme pattern are much used in English and Chinese short stories, so we can maintain these TP patterns when coming across those two patterns.

Example 1:

> ST: He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two-and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.
> TT: 他很瘦削，非常严肃。可怜的人儿，他只有二十二岁——就负起了家庭的担子！他需要一件新大衣，手套也没有。

It can be seen that the TT maintains the original TP patterns (the linear theme pattern)for the linear theme pattern is both highly adopted in the English and Chinese short stories' writing. And it is beneficial to moving forward stories and making writers understood.

Example 2:

> ST: It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it，she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him.
> TT: 它甚至配得上那只金表。她一看到就认为非给吉姆买下不可。它简直像他的为人。

The above example shows that Chinese and English all prefer the constant theme pattern, so the translator should try to keep the original constant theme pattern in translating short stories.

Example 3:

> ST：Now, when the income was shrunk to＄20, the letters of "Dillingham" looked blurred, as though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della.
> TT：现在收入缩减到二十块钱，"迪林汉"几个字看来就有些模糊，仿佛它们正在郑重考虑，是不是缩成一个质朴而谦逊的"迪"字为好。但是每逢詹姆斯·迪林汉·扬先生回家上楼，走进房间的时候，詹姆斯·迪林汉·扬太太——就是刚才已经介绍给各位的德拉——总是管他叫做"吉姆"，总是热烈地拥抱他。

The discourses above show that the ST and the TT all adopt the linear theme pattern to organize the language to convey ideas. The part of the rheme in the first clause

(*"Dillingham"*) becomes the theme in the second clause. Linear theme patterns are both usually used in the writing of English and Chinese short stories. So Wang Yongnian uses the original pattern to build the Chinese story.

2.3.2 Adjusting Original TP Patterns

In translation, a number of factors influence the choice and formation of TP patterns. We should adjust properly the clause sequence among clauses or adjust the word order within the clause according to the reading habits of Chinese, making the sentence understood best and achieving maximum effect. In a ST, there are several clauses adopting the combined pattern, but it is less used in the Chinese language. Therefore, we must adjust the word order or the clause sequence so as to adjust the original TP patterns of the group.

Example 4:

> ST: Only＄1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling-something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.
> TT: (她)只有一块八毛七分钱来给吉姆买礼物。她的吉姆。为了买一件好东西送给他，德拉自得其乐地筹划了好些日子。（她）要买一件精致、珍奇而真有价值的东西—够得上为吉姆所有的东西固然很少，可总得有些相称才成呀。

Chinese prefers the constant theme pattern, so the TT above changes the original TP patterns(the irregular pattern with just one clause) to meet Chinese readers' reading habits.

Example 5:

> ST: Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty- seven cents.
> TT: 这些铜子儿是每次一个、两个向杂货铺、菜贩和肉店老板那儿死乞白赖地硬扣下来的；人家虽然没有明说，自己总觉得这种掂斤播两的交易未免太吝啬，当时脸都臊红了。德拉数了三遍。（她）数来数去还是一块八毛七分钱。the irregular pattern

It can be seen in the ST that there is only one clause in the whole discourse, *"Three times Della counted it"*. However, the TT adopts the constant theme pattern and the linear theme pattern without using the irregular pattern. So, the TT will be more smooth and can convey more information efficiently.

Example 6:

> ST: ...and she had only ＄1.87 with which to buy Jim a present.

She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result.
TT: 她只有一块八毛七分钱来给吉姆买一件礼物。好几个月来，她省吃俭用，能攒起来的都攒了，可结果(她)只有这一点儿。

The ST adopts the constant theme pattern while the TT adjusts the pattern and organizes the text with the constant rheme pattern and the linear theme pattern, for the latter two patterns can be beneficial to showing more details to Chinese readers.

CONCLUSION

Translation studies and practices should treat each discourse as a complete whole. Based on thematic theory and TP theory, this paper studies the strategies adopted by Wang Yongnian to translate O·Henry's short stories in the case study of *The Gift of the Magi*, thus providing some practical values to E-C translation of short stories. And two main strategies have been found--maintaining original TP patterns and adjusting original TP patterns. Many factors are concerned in this process, such as, culture differences and the genre of texts. All in all, translators should try to maintain the TP patterns of STs. But when the original TP patterns can not be directly preserved, it is necessary to reconstruct the appropriate TP patterns in TTs to reproduce the original discourse information structure and the overall discourse effects.

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