The Importance of Thematic Structure in Teaching Translation

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Abstract: The present paper intends to raise awareness of the relationship between Thematic structure and translation and proposes ways to integrate it in class. It presents briefly the theory on Theme-Rheme within the Systemic Functional Framework. Then, it puts forward a class activity focusing on the application of the theory on text production. Not restricted only to translation students, this type of activity may help language students become better and more conscious text producers in any language.

Keywords: Thematic structure, Theme-Rheme, Thematic progression, translation, foreign language teaching, discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Translation has become very important in people' everyday life as humans have turned multilingual and societies globalised. From an academic perspective, translation, both as process and product, has been studied by many scholars, such as Baker (1992), Chesterman (1997), Nord (1997), Venuti (2012) and Munday (2016), to mention just a few. At the same time, studies in the field of translation pedagogy (Baer & Koby 2003; Varela Salinas 2007; Piotrowska & Tyupa 2014; Venuti 2016) have been carried out, in order to propose new methods and improve the existing ones, with the aim of preparing better translators.

Within the area of translation didactics, different interrelated branches, such as communication theories, pragmatics, semiotics, can shed light on and facilitate the process of teaching translation. Another linguistic branch that can offer useful insights, both theoretically and practically, is discourse analysis, as pointed out by the

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studies carried on the relation between discourse analysis and translation (Hatim & Mason 1993; Beeby-Lonsdale 1996; Schäffner 2002; Hubscher-Davidson 2007). Following Nida's words (1997), knowing the structure and dynamics of discourse helps translators translate the text more readily and accurately. Text producers and translators need to be aware, not only of cognitive and semantic meanings and/or syntactic structures, but also of information structure (Enkvist 1978). Information may be structured by means of genres and generic structures, coherence, cohesion, topic, Thematic structure and old-new information.

Focusing on Thematic structure, several studies have been conducted on the importance it has in translating texts (Ventola 1995; McCabe 1999; Matthiessen 2004; Dejica 2004; Dejica 2009). Language learners and language producers need to understand that coherent texts are not produced aleatory, without any structure. Sentences are not independent; they depend on a particular text and situation. Connections exist within and in between sentences. One type of such connection is realized through the arrangement of information within each clause and the way this relates to the arrangement of information in preceding and following clauses and sentences. This contributes mainly to topic development and maintenance. Thematic structure provides insights into the internal organization and communicative nature of a text. The Theme-Rheme analysis of a text shows the focus of the text and guides the receiver of the text throughout the unfolding message (Stoian 2015: 54).

This paper presents briefly the theory of Thematic structure, particularly Theme-Rheme and its development, within the Systemic Functional framework. Then, it proposes a class activity focusing on the application of the theory on text production. Its overall aim is to show that Thematic structure is a valuable tool both in producing and in translating texts.

2. Thematic structure

As pointed out by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 88), the clause can be characterised as a message; "it has some form of organization whereby it fits in with, and contributes to, the flow of discourse". One way to achieve this is by Thematic structure. This organizes the beginning of the clause and directs the recipient's attention to the parts of the message the sender wants to highlight (Dejica 2010; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014). As such, it "enables the clause to be packed in ways which make it effective given its purpose and its context" (Eggins 1994: 273). Practically, Thematic structure divides the clause in two different constituents: Theme and Rheme, following this expressed order.

2.1. Theme-Rheme
Theme stands for the starting point of the message, presenting its topic. The speaker/writer's choice of Theme "guides the addressee in developing an

interpretation of the message", enabling her/him to process it (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014: 89). Theme is expressed by the first experiential constituent in the clause, i.e. the first group or phrase in the clause that functions as a participant, circumstance or process. Rheme, in turn, is represented by the part of the clause that is not a Theme, i.e. the remainder of the message. This is where Theme is developed (Eggins 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

(1) (Theme) Flowers + (Rheme) are beautiful.

2.2. Types of Themes

There are different types of Themes. The initial element of a clause is classified according to its composition. It usually contains only one constituent, the experiential one. In this case, it is called simple Theme.

(2) (Theme) John + (Rheme) is ill.

Theme can also be multiple and include other types of constituents besides experiential, such as textual, which give cohesion to the text and indicate the relation between clauses, and interpersonal, which show the intrusion and/or point of view of the writer (Thompson 2004; Halliday & Matthiessen 2014).

(3) (Textual Theme) Moreover, (Interpersonal Theme) unfortunately, (experiential Theme) John + (Rheme) is ill.

In addition, Theme is classified also according to its prominence. The choice of the element placed in Theme position is related to its typicality. If the choice is typical, e.g. a Subject in a declarative sentence, the Theme is unmarked, whereas, if the choice is atypical, e.g. a Complement in a declarative sentence, the Theme is marked. Table 1 summarises the possible choices of each main type of speech act.

Type	Unmarked Theme	Marked Theme	Rheme
Declarative	John		is ill.
		Ill	is John.
Interrogative	Can you		help me?
		You	can help me?
Imperative	Submit		your papers to John.
		To John,	submit your papers.

Table 1. Type of Themes

As can be noticed, the choice of Theme determines the meaning of the clause. It is usually dependent on the context and purpose of communication.

2.3. Thematic development

Moving to an upper level, Theme is important not only at a clausal level, but also at a textual one. The manner in which "Themes interact with each other and with

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Rhemes in order to provide continuity in discourse and to organize the text" (McCabe 1999: 169) is called Thematic development (Fries 1983). Daneš (1974) proposed three different types of Thematic progression:

a) Linear – a piece of information from the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the following clause. The development of the message is cumulative as it is constructed on newly introduced information.

(4) John has 3 *children*. <u>They</u> all go to *school*. <u>The school</u> is situated near to their house.

Theme	Rheme
John	has 3 children
They all	go to school
The school	is situated near to their house

Figure 1. Linear progression

b) Constant – the same Theme is kept over a sequence of clauses. In this case, information is introduced in the Rheme of each clause. In other words, the Theme provides a clear focus, while the Rheme develops the message.

(5) <u>John</u> lives in Washington. <u>He</u> is married <u>and (he)</u> has 3 children.

Theme	Rheme
John	lives in Washington
He	is married
and (he)	has 3 children

Figure 2. Constant progression

c) Derived – different pieces of information are taken from the Rheme of one clause and individually used as Themes in the following clauses.

(6) John has *3 children*. <u>Marcus, the eldest one</u>, goes to school. <u>David</u> goes to kindergarten, <u>while Eva</u> stays home with her nanny.

Theme	Rheme
John	has 3 children
Marcus, the eldest one,	goes to school
David	goes to kindergarten
while Eva	stays home with her nanny

Figure 3. Derived progression

As indicated by the previous examples, different patterns lead to different messages, signalling a distinct focus, starting point or useful information.

3. Class activity on Thematic structure

The concepts and information presented earlier are difficult to understand for language and translation students that have no previous knowledge of applied linguistics. This difficulty needs to be taken into consideration in class. As such, different activities can be useful to make them understand and master the building of a cohesive and coherent message, starting with its information structure.

This paper proposes a class activity aimed at raising students' awareness of the importance of Thematic structure in producing a text, manipulating its message and influencing its audience. Translation students are presented with a text and are required to perform several tasks. In the following part, a possible succession of activities are presented.

I. Students are asked to read the following text:

Book your dream honeymoon with us. Our dedicated honeymoons team is able to recommend you the best hotels in the world. We have fantastic honeymoon packages and offers, making the special even more special. Our website offers you the latest and best honeymoon offers. We can tailor make your perfect itinerary and make your dream honeymoon come true. Call us now at +40 021 33 33 33. (adapted from Only Exclusive Travel 2009)

II. They are asked to identify its Themes and Rhemes, according to the following model:

Theme	Rheme

Figure 4. Model for analysis

II. Students are provided with the solution:

Theme	Rheme
Book	your dream honeymoon with us
Our dedicated honeymoons team	is able to recommend you the best hotels in the world
We	have fantastic honeymoon packages and offers, making the special even more special
Our website	offers you the latest and best honeymoon offers
We	can tailor make your perfect itinerary
and (we)	(can) make your dream honeymoon come true
Call	us now at +40 021 33 33 33

Figure 5. Focus 1

III. Students are asked to identify also the Thematic pattern of the text.
IV. They are provided with the solution:

Theme	Rheme
Book	your dream honeymoon with us
Our dedicated honeymoons team	is able to recommend you the best hotels in the world
We	have fantastic honeymoon packages and offers, making the special even more special
Our website	offers you the latest and best honeymoon offers
We	can tailor make your perfect itinerary
and (we)	(can) make your dream honeymoon come true
Call	us now at +40 021 33 33 33

Figure 6. Thematic progression Focus 1

V. Students are then shown how to change the focus of the text from one topic to another, in this case, from the travel agency and its team to the possible client. The same continuous pattern is maintained. This is the new text:

Book your dream honeymoon with us. You are recommended the best hotels in the world by our dedicated honeymoons team. You are offered fantastic honeymoon packages and offers, making the special even more special. You can check our website for the latest and best honeymoon offers. You can have your perfect itinerary tailored make by our team and witness your dream honeymoon coming true. Call us now at +40 021 33 33 33.

Theme	Rheme
Book	your dream honeymoon with us
You	are recommended the best hotels in the world by our dedicated honeymoons team
You	are offered fantastic honeymoon packages and offers, making the special even more special
You	can check our website for the latest and best honeymoon offers
You	can have your perfect itinerary tailored make by our team
and (you)	(can) witness your dream honeymoon coming true
Call	us now at +40 021 33 33 33

Figure 7. Thematic progression Focus 2

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VI. Students are invited to consider the difference in focus and how it affects the overall message.

After few moments of brainstorming, they are explained that a text, in this case an advertisement, can have three main focuses, i.e. the product advertised, the possible buyer and the company advertising. Each of these three topics offers a different perspective on the message. In the first text provided, the initial one, the focus is on the travel agency and its team. The use of 'we', instead of the name of the agency makes the message more human, sounds more personal and reduces distance between interlocutors (Stoian 2015). The possible client will deal with a team of professionals and not with a distant agency. The continuous repetition of 'we' seems to be used to reiterate all the things that the travel agency can do. In the case of the second text, attention shifts to the client. The distance between interlocutors is reduced as the receiver of the message is directly addressed. Now, the main focus is the client and everything s/he can do, see and buy. The continuous pattern, i.e. the repetition of 'you', gives the message the impression of a personalized offer for that particular one who stands out of from the mass (Stoian 2015).

VI. Students are asked to shift the focus of the text from the travel agency to the product advertised. They should provide this or something similar:

Book your dream honeymoon with us. The best hotels in the world are recommended by our dedicated honeymoons team. Fantastic honeymoon packages and offers are waiting for you, making the special even more special. The latest and best honeymoon offers are available on our website. Your perfect itinerary can be tailor made so that your dream honeymoon comes true. Call us now at +40 021 33 33 33.

The text's Theme-Rheme analysis would look as indicated in Fig. 8.

Theme	Rheme
Book	your dream honeymoon with us
The best hotels in the world	are recommended by our dedicated honeymoons team
Fantastic honeymoon packages and offers	are waiting for you, making the special even more special
The latest and best honeymoon offers	are available on our website
Your perfect itinerary	can be tailor made
so that your dream honeymoon	comes true
Call	us now at +40 021 33 33 33

Figure 8. Focus 3

VII. After verifying it with the class, students are invited again to consider the difference in focus and how it affects the overall message.

The focus on the product makes the Theme constituent longer than in the other two texts as it develops on the type, quality and characteristics of the product advertised. The tone is no longer very close and personal. The agency does not talk about itself and its team and the client is no longer directly addressed. In addition, the long noun phases in Thematic position confer objectivity to the message. However, the product is going from general, i.e. 'the best hotels in the world', to particular, i.e. 'your dream honeymoon', reaching the possible client with a personalised offer.

VIII. Students receive as a homework the task to modify the Thematic pattern of the initial text and make it linear and/or derived.

4. Conclusion

This paper has intended to show the necessity of teaching translation students the importance of the Thematic structure of a text. The information placed in Theme and Rheme and its arrangement in a sequence of clauses is vital for the production, reception, understanding and translation of a text. The present paper has proposed a class activity to raise students' awareness on Thematic structure. This type of class activity is aimed to show students how messages can be constructed, manipulated and played with, just by modifying the element that occupies the position of Theme. They discover that the information placed in Theme does not influence only the focus and coherence of the message, but also its tone, objectivity/ subjectivity and generality/ particularity. Several other activities can be done in class following this one. After becoming aware of Thematic structure, students could reflect on their first language and perform a contrastive analysis. They could also translate texts, maintaining and/or changing the Thematic structure.

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