

# Thematic Progression and Discourse Analysis

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**Abstract:** *Thematic progression is a very important means for discourse construction. Different types of discourse will choose different thematic progression patterns in order to realize their different communicative purposes. Analyzing discourse through thematic progression pattern is helpful to understand the content and organization of the discourse. This paper uses Halliday's [1] Theme-Rheme Theory and Zhu's [2] four patterns of thematic progression to analyze Obama's inaugural speech. It finds that the simple theme, unmarked theme and the constant thematic progression pattern are used mostly to achieving the communicative purposes.*

**Keywords:** *Theme-rheme theory, Thematic progression, Thematic progression pattern, Communicative purposes*

## 1. Introduction

Thematic progression is an implicit means of discourse coherence, which reflects the distribution of new and old information. Since F. Danes put forward this concept in 1970, many scholars have made different researches and contributions in this field. The scholar Xu put forward four basic patterns of thematic progression when analyzing the relationship between theme and rheme in sentences. With the deepening of research, scholars have gradually shifted their focus to the application value of thematic progression pattern. Huang [3] and Zhu [2] put thematic progression pattern into discourse analysis to study the textual function and information structure of thematic progression model. Lu applied the thematic progression model to foreign language teaching, believing that thematic progression pattern would play a positive role in the teaching of writing and reading. Hatim and Liu studied how to introduce thematic progression into translation and discussed its importance in text translation. Wu studies the relationship between thematic progression and text genre, and believes that the speaker's genre consciousness determines the thematic progression of a text.

Although the study of thematic progression has involved in various aspects, a few scholars have analyzed thematic progression pattern to the analysis of American president's inaugural speech. This paper uses Halliday's [1] Theme-Rheme Theory and Zhu's [2] four patterns of thematic progression to analyze Obama's inaugural speech in order to reveal how does Obama realize his purposes through the thematic progression.

This article will start with the introduction part. Next, it comes to Theme-Rheme structure part, in which the theme-rheme structure will be illustrated in detail and different types of theme are introduced combined with examples. After it, different thematic progression patterns are described and the four patterns put forward by scholar Zhu [2] are described fully with examples. Then it will show how data are collected and analyzed. More importantly, examples from the collected data with those four patterns are discussed. This article ends with the conclusion part.

## 2. Theme-Rheme Structure

According to the theory of Systemic Functional Grammar, thematic structure is divided into two parts: theme and rheme. Theme is indicated by position in the clause. It is the element which serves as the 'point of departure' [1] of the message and is that which the clause is concerned, while rheme refers to the remainder of the message, viz. the part in which the Theme is developed [4].

For classification of theme, based on the complexity of thematic structure, Halliday and Matthiessen [4] have divided theme into three types: simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme. The difference between simple theme and multiple Theme lies in that for the interior structure there is still theme-rheme structure in the former while not for the latter. Halliday [1] argued that in the multiple theme structure all components are arranged in a certain sequence: textual-interpersonal-ideational, which is related to

Halliday's [1] three metafunctions of language that are textual function, interpersonal function and ideational function. Textual components consist of continuative components (e.g., well, yes, now), structural components (e.g., and, but, when) and conjunctive components (e.g., therefore, so, finally). Interpersonal components consist of vocative components (e.g., ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, Lily), modal components (e.g., definitely, to my surprise), finite components (e.g., shouldn't, has, do) and the last one WH- worlds (e.g., why, when, how). Basically, each clause has a theme which relates to the ideational function of language, which represents what the clause is about, or the Topic of the clause. Clausal theme refers to the whole clause is regarded as the theme of a sentence. The followings are some examples respectively (# is used to separate theme and rheme).

(a) My aunt and uncle # prepared a pleasant gift to celebrating my birthday. (Simple Theme)

(b) Well, boys and girls, the learning for today # is about nominal clause. (Multiple Theme. Well servers textual function, boys and girls serves interpersonal function and the learning for today serves ideational function.) Whether it is a gorgeous day #, we will go shopping tomorrow. (Clausal Theme)

Theme can also be classified into marked theme and unmarked theme. Unmarked theme refers to that the sentence subject overlaps with the theme while when the sentence elements other than the subject is used for theme, it is called marked theme.:

### 3. Thematic Progression

As Theme and Rheme are regarded as the basic components of information structure in text. Therefore, every text can be regarded as the sequences of themes. The real thematic structure refers to paragraphs, the whole text and the context. The complex relations among themes are called thematic progression. It recommended that thematic progression have a direct and huge influence on the coherence of a text as well as the distribution of core information in the text. Danes [5] for the first time proposed the most common five types of thematic progression pattern: Presently, Xu put forward his four types of thematic progression. Then Huang [3] summed up seven kinds. Zhu [2] urged that there are four patterns of thematic progression. In this article, Zhu's [2] four patterns of thematic progression are used to analysis the collected data. The four patterns of thematic progression are portrayed as the following.

a) the constant theme pattern

Constant theme pattern means that a common theme is shared by each clause and this theme equates with given information. This pattern is often used in biographical information or textbooks and descriptions of factual information focusing on a particular thing or concept, as the following shows.

T1-R1

T2(=T1)-R2

T3(=T1)-R3

...

Tn(=T1)-Rn

e.g., Lily is now in New Zealand. She has been there for five years. She found a job there after graduated from university.

For the second and third sentence, the theme is the pronoun "she", which equates to the theme of the first sentence Lily, while the rheme of each sentence is different.

b) the constant rheme pattern

Similar to the constant theme pattern, the constant rheme pattern means that a common rheme is shared by each clause but with different theme, as the following shows.

T1-R1

T2-R2(=R1)

T3-R3(=R1)

...

Tn-Rn(=R1)

e.g., Apple is a kind of fruit. Orange is a kind of fruit. Banana is also a kind of fruit.

It is easy to find that these three short sentences share the same rheme, i.e., fruit, while themes of each sentence are different.

c) the linear theme pattern

The linear theme pattern means that the rheme of one clause is taken up as the theme of the next clause, and whose rheme serves as the theme of its following sentence, as the following structure shows.

T1-R1

T2(=R1)-R2

T3(=R2)-R3

...

Tn(=Rn-1)-Rn

e.g., Last year, I graduated from Henan Polytechnic University. In the university there is a big playground. In the playground, there are many recreational facilities.

For the first sentence, Henan Polytechnic University is regarded as the rheme. While in the second sentence, it is used as the theme and playground as the rheme. While in the third sentence, playground is placed at the position of theme and is regarded as the theme of the third sentence.

d) the cross pattern

The cross pattern means that the theme of the former sentence is used as the rheme of the latter sentence, whose theme is also used as the rheme of its following sentence, as the following structure presents.

T1-R1

T2-R2(=T1)

T3-R3(=T2)

...

Tn-Rn(=Tn-1)

e.g., The movie was boring. I don't like it. While others don't agree with me.

For the first sentence, the movie is the theme while in the second sentence, the movie is replaced by the pronoun it and used as the second sentence's rheme. For the second sentence, the pronoun I is considered as the theme while in the third sentence me is used as the rheme which is a counterpart of I-an accusative form, i.e., me.

## 4. Data Collection and Analysis

### 4.1. Research Procedures

For the present research, it follows the following three steps. First of all, before doing the research, it needs to collect the data used for this research. The data is a piece of inaugural address delivered by one of American president Obama, which is collected from the official website: Hujiang website ([www.hjenglish.com](http://www.hjenglish.com)). After collecting the data, then it is of great necessity and importance to give a careful and detail analysis of it. Definitely, this step is the core of this research, which should conduct more than more round of analysis. For the first round of analysis, the total number of sentences amounts to 106. Also, the number of each type of theme and each pattern of thematic progression are all settled respectively. In order to assure the accuracy, it is better to do another one round analysis. To make the results more convincing, the whole process of analysis will refer to related literature for several times. If there are differences between the two rounds of analysis, then it is obvious to consult to the definition of theme and rheme to give a final decision. For the last step, disposing and integrating the final data is also quite important. All the aforementioned three steps are done, then the research will go to the next phase, data analysis and discussion.

#### 4.2. Data analysis and discussion

As the aforementioned analysis, based on the number and category of the theme in a sentence, theme can be divided into simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme. In this piece of speech given by the president Obama, simple theme is the most common, nearly accounting for 84%, while clausal theme is the least (see Table 1). As we all know that, each president of America would deliver an inaugural address when they won the general election in order to gain the public's confidence and support.

Different from those written texts, for spoken speeches, as we all know that listeners cannot stop for a long time to review the meaning of a sentence in order to catch up with the speaker. It is also of vital importance for speakers to keep it in mind. Consequently, sentences in a speech generally will be characterized by little short, plain and easy to understand sentences with simple structures. As a result, in this Obama's address, simple theme occurs mostly and clausal theme ranks least. In addition, it is worth pointing out that the total number of simple theme is more than five times of the total number of multiple theme and clausal theme, which is in accordance with the characteristics of spoken speeches.

Table 1: The number of different types of theme in the address

Type of Theme	Simple Theme	Multiple Theme	Clausal Theme
Amount	89	15	2
Percent (%)	83.96%	14.16%	1.88%

Based on whether the subject overlaps with the theme in the same sentence, theme can further be classified into two types, i.e., marked theme and unmarked theme. If the theme overlaps with the subject in the sentence, then the theme belongs to unmarked theme otherwise it belongs to the marked theme. There is no doubt that for spoken speeches, the use of unmarked theme is easier for listeners to follow the speaker and get the speaker's meaning. Actually, according to Table 2, it is clear to see that the analysis of this speech shows that the S+V+O structure is used more often, which explains why the unmarked theme are used more than marked theme (see Table 2).

Table 2: The number of marked theme and unmarked theme

Type of Theme	Marked Theme	Unmarked Theme
Amount	44	62
Percent (%)	41.51%	58.49%

Different genre of texts present different characteristics. As Fries [6] has argued that the pattern of thematic progression will change according to the text genre. In other words, the choice of pattern of thematic progression is not arbitrary, but subject to the specific text genre. Analysis of the data used in this research shows that the constant theme pattern accounts to the biggest proportion, and then the linear pattern and the constant rheme pattern ranks second and third respectively. It is interesting to find that the cross pattern does not occur in the Obama's speech. As stated in the previous part, the constant theme pattern is suitable for describing the same topic from different perspectives. Moreover, the use of the constant theme pattern will play an important role in emphasizing the theme, which no doubt can effectively narrow the distance between the speaker and the audience to a great extent. As a consequence, the speech effect will be more obvious and prominent. While, the use of the linear pattern makes the context more compact and integrated, which enables the speaker to deliver a speech smoother, making the speech full of real appeal (see Table 3). The reason for why the cross pattern does not use in the speech may be attribute to its complexity and difficulty for understanding in spoken speeches, thus the speaker can not achieve his/her goal for delivering a speech.

Table 3: Distribution of different thematic progression patterns

Thematic Progression Pattern	Amount	Percent (%)
the constant Theme pattern	19	67.86%
the constant Rheme pattern	2	7.14%
the linear pattern	7	25%
the cross pattern	0	0

#### 4.3. Examples analysis and discussion

After an overall but rough analysis of the data, now it comes to the Example analysis and discussion section. In this section, several examples taken from the data will be analyzed and discussed in detail (T represents theme and R represents rheme).

(a) We (T1) will build the roads and bridges, the electric grids and digital lines that feed our commerce and bind us together (R1). We (T2=T1) will restore science to its rightful place, and wield technology's wonders to raise healthcare's quality and lower its cost (R2). We (T3=T1) will harness the sun and the winds and the soil to fuel our cars and run our factories (R3). And we (T4=T1) will transform our schools and colleges and universities to meet the demands of a new age (R4).

In this extract, it is clear to find that the constant theme pattern is used. Each sentence possesses the same theme, i.e., the pronoun “we” but with different rhemes. Because of the use of the constant theme pattern, it effectively enhanced the effect of the discourse and also pointed out the specific aspects that Americans should deal with together, which makes president Obama successfully shorten the distance with the audience when making this speech and thus strengthens the confidence of American people towards Obama.

(b) Our challenges (T1) may be new (R1). The instruments with which we meet them (T2) may be new (R2). But those values upon which our success (T3) depends - hard work and honesty, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and patriotism-these things are old (R3). These things (T4=R3) are true (R4). They (T5=T4) have been the quiet force of progress throughout our history (R5).

In this extract, obviously, both the linear pattern and the constant theme pattern are used simultaneously, which makes the textual structure more compact and more tightly connected. As a matter of fact, the use of the linear pattern makes it easier to understand and follow the speaker because the theme of the following sentence is the rheme of its previous sentence, making the structure more compact and listeners better to follow and understand.

(c) This (T1) is the journey we continue today (R1). We (T2) remain the most prosperous, powerful nation on Earth (R2). Our workers (T3) are no less productive than when this crisis began (R3). Our minds (T4) are no less inventive, our goods and services no less needed than they were last week or last month or last year (R4). Our capacity (T5) remains undiminished (R5).

In this extract, T3, T4 and T5 are concrete explanation for the R2 “the most prosperous, powerful nation on the Earth”. Definitely, it can be regarded as combination use of the constant theme pattern and the linear pattern. By using these two patterns, president Obama first states that America remains the most prosperous and powerful nation on Earth, and then from three aspects their workers, their minds and their capacity illustrates the reason. The integrated structure makes the public believe what Obama has said and have confidence to make the country better.

## 5. Conclusion

From the analysis of thematic progression in Obama’s inaugural address, it can be concluded that the theme and rheme of each sentence in the text are not isolated, but closely related with each other. Thematic progression is the arrangement and combination of language materials in a text, and it is an important means to realize the text function, the author’s communicative purposes and the intentions of writing. Different types of discourse also have its different focus on the choice of thematic progression patterns. From the analysis, it shows that this kind of political speech mostly adopts the constant theme pattern and the linear pattern. The first one, the constant theme pattern can effectively shorten the distance between the speaker and the audience, and make the speech more obvious and prominent by repeating the same theme. While, the linear pattern plays a significant role in ensuring the smoothness of the discourse.

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