

# Translation Strategies for Thematic Progression Patterns in English and Chinese

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## Abstract

According to the theory of functional linguistics, the thematic progression patterns are important means of creating the organization of a discourse. The importance of discourse translation, in recent years, has been increasingly highlighted and concerned. This paper aims to discuss the strategies for mutual translation of English and Chinese based on a comparative study of the different presentations of the thematic progression patterns.

**Keywords:** theme, rhyme, thematic progression pattern, translation strategies

## 1. Introduction

Recently, Chinese translation studies are committed to exploring translation theory and practice by employing the achievements of linguistics studies. Holmes (1988) pointed out that linguistic theories can present a highly formalized language analysis, which is quite beneficial for inter-language translation. Although Holmes made such comments more than 20 years ago from an angle of discourse linguistics, his views on translation theory and practice are still of great referential value even today. Halliday (2004), the founder of systemic functional linguistics, pointed out that any clause is composed of two parts: theme and rheme, and that the constructive way of theme movement constitutes a thematic progression pattern which can be found in a discourse. Hence, the linguistic analysis of thematic progression pattern can be regarded as a kind of discourse analysis, which is different from the traditional syntactic linguistic analysis. Thus, the translation for thematic progression pattern is a sort of discourse translation. And as far as the discourse level is concerned, the inter-language translation can be treated as a kind of transformation from one type of thematic progression pattern to another type of thematic progress pattern. Since English and Chinese are quite different languages, it is not easy to transform the English thematic progression pattern to Chinese thematic progression pattern and vice versa. Therefore, this paper will discuss the translation strategies for transformation of thematic progression patterns used in English and Chinese.

## 2. Literature Review

From the current literature, we can find that researchers in translation field began to borrow the Theme-Rheme structure theory about 20 years ago. Most of them combined the views and ideas of Prague School and those of Systemic Functional School to analyze the information distribution at the sentence level, and the cohesion and coherence problems at the textual level. For example, Newmark (1988) analyzed the role and distribution of the old and new information structure in the sentence from the view of Syntactic Function of Prague School. In the discussion of discourse coherence, Hatim & Mason (1990) combined theme-rheme structure and information structure, and offered concrete examples to explain thematic progression patterns are not only closely related to discourse coherence, but also to different discourse genre structures. Ventola (1996) investigated the transformation of thematic structures in the German-English mutual translation of academic papers. Baker (1992) noticed the different thematic progression patterns among different languages such as English, German, Arabic, Portuguese, Chinese, Japanese, etc. and the correlations with different discourse types. Chinese translation

scholars, in recent years, also try to explore the problems of translation theory and practice under the guidance of the theoretic study of the theme-rhyme structures. Here is a case in point. Huang (2002) compared different translation version effects from different theme choice of the source and target texts, while Liu and Yu (2000) explored the problem of translation unit, which has been quite controversial among the translation researchers.

To sum up, translation studies based on the linguistic achievements have already shifted from the focus on word order arrangement at the sentence level to the structure and coherence at the discourse level. This type of research and discussion are very constructive and innovative. Hence, this paper starts from the analysis of the different presentations of thematic progression patterns in English and Chinese to discuss the problems and difficulties that translators may encounter in mutual translation between English and Chinese, and then puts forward the correspondent translation strategies.

### 3. Thematic Progression Patterns

Concepts of theme and rhyme are first proposed by Mathethius (1975), the founder of information structure in Prague School, and then further developed by Halliday. He interpreted that “Theme is the starting point of clause information, and it is what the clause cares about; rhyme is the statement of the theme, is around the theme and the extended content (Halliday, 2004, p. 64).” Thematic progression pattern appears when a set of meaningful sense groups constitute a coherent discourse, and some connections may be used between theme and rhyme of a clause, and it may promote the orderly development of a discourse. Different constructive ways of theme and rhyme are called thematic progression patterns or the theme-rhyme extension patterns. Thematic progression patterns clearly features discourse coherence and development. Linguists both at home and abroad have different classifications of the thematic progression patterns. For instance, Fries (1995b) classified the thematic progression patterns into two groups: the progression pattern with repeated theme or with the derivative theme. Xu (1985) divided the thematic progression pattern into four groups, while Huang (1994) differentiated the thematic progression pattern into 7 groups. Later, Wendan Li (2005) further classified the thematic progression pattern into more than 10 groups. However, in specific analysis of literary works, none of the classification can end its details. This section will take the three basic patterns of Hu’s classification for the theme-rhyme structures (1994) to discuss. These patterns are the linear extension pattern, the constant theme pattern and the constant rhyme pattern.

#### 3.1 Linear Extension Pattern

There are two subclasses of the linear extension pattern of the theme-rhyme structure. For the first subclass, one theme-rhyme structure links with another in which the theme and the rhyme are different from those in the previous structure. We can map this sequence of thematic progression pattern as figure 1 (“T<sup>1</sup>” for “Theme one”, “R<sup>1</sup>” for “rhyme one”). This sequence is usually used in detailed description or parallel sentence structures. See examples (1) and (2). For the second subclass, the rhyme or the part of rhyme of the first theme-rhyme structure becomes the theme in the second theme-rhyme structure. We can illustrate the sequence of this pattern as figure 2. This sequence is quite often applied in expressing an unsuspended description since all the clauses of the discourse span are interlocked completely with each other. Apart from this, we may observe the usages of anaphora or cataphora when we use the same theme or rhyme again in this pattern probably for the sake of language economy. See examples (3) and (4). Furthermore, we may notice that if we take the same theme in Chinese, the theme can be omitted anaphorically (see examples (5) and (8)) or cataphorically (see example (9)). In these cases, the omitted or unspecified themes are marked as “Ø”.

1) Behind him, the hills (T<sup>1</sup>) are open (R<sup>1</sup>), the sun (T<sup>2</sup>) blazes down upon fields so large as to give an unenclosed character to the landscape (R<sup>2</sup>), the lanes (T<sup>3</sup>) are white (R<sup>3</sup>), the hedges (T<sup>4</sup>) low and plashed (R<sup>4</sup>), the atmosphere (T<sup>5</sup>) colorless (R<sup>5</sup>). *Tess of the D’Urbervill*

2) 他 (T<sup>1</sup>) 来 了, 你 (T<sup>2</sup>) 就 不 用 来 了。

He come PRT, you then no come PRT. (If he comes, then you don’t have to come.)

$$T_1-R_1 \Longrightarrow T_2-R_2 \Longrightarrow T_3-R_3 \Longrightarrow \dots \Longrightarrow T_n-R_n$$

Figure 1. Linear extension pattern (a)

3) The immigrants ( $T^1$ ) were given a list of simple English sentences ( $R^1$ ), half of them ( $T^2$ ) containing some grammatical errors ( $R^2$ ).

4) 在回来的路上, 我 ( $T^1$ ) 看见小王了 ( $R^1$ ), 他 ( $T^2$ ) 正在给花浇水 ( $R^2$ ).

On back PRT road up, I see Xiao Wang PRT, he right be for flower water. (On the way back, I saw Xiao Wang who was watering the flowers.)

5) 韩学愈 ( $T^1$ ) 一定在暗算自己 ( $R^1$ ),  $\emptyset^2$  就不知道他怎样暗算 ( $R^2$ ). *Fortress*

*Besieged*

Han Hue-yu must be plot against me, still not know he how plot. (Han Hue-yu was undoubtedly plotting against me, but how, I didn't know.)

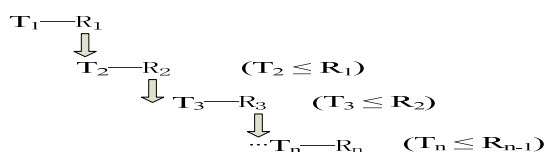


Figure 2. Linear extension pattern (b)

### 3.2 Constant-Theme Pattern

In this pattern, we observe that the same theme can be shared by a series of clauses. In this situation, the theme can be repeated or replaced by pronouns for the purpose of emphasis or stress. See examples (6) and (7). The sequence of this constant-theme pattern can be illustrated as figure 3. Just as we discussed above, we often observe that the zero theme is applied when the same theme is used repeatedly in Chinese. See examples (8) and (9). These variations of sequence can be illustrated as figure 4 and figure 5 respectively. In figure 4, the theme has been anaphorically left out, while in figure 5, the theme has been cataphorically emptied. Apart from this, in real language use, the thematic progression patterns, like figure 4 and figure 5, can be integrated with each other and make very complex and flexible discourse.

6) I ( $T^1$ ) came ( $R^1$ ); I ( $T^1$ ) saw ( $R^2$ ); I ( $T^1$ ) conquered ( $R^3$ ). *Julius Caesar*

7) “我 ( $T^1$ ) 没有借口, 我 ( $T^1$ ) 无法解释, 我 ( $T^1$ ) 不敢求你谅解。”

I have no excuse, I no way explain. I no dare ask you forgive. (I have no excuses and no way to explain. I couldn't ask for your forgiveness.)

我 ( $T^1$ ) 只希望你快忘记我这个软弱, 没有坦白勇气的人。”

I only wish you quick forget me this coward no frank courage PRT man. (I only hope you will quickly forget this coward who lacks the courage to be frank.) *Fortress Besieged*

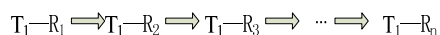


Figure 3. Constant-theme pattern (a)

8) 苏小姐 ( $T^1$ ) 一向瞧不起这位寒碜的孙太太,

Su Miss always scorns this-CL poor Sun Mrs.,

érqiě zuì bù xǐhuān xiǎoháizǐ, kěshì tīng le zhèxiē huà, xīn shàng gāoxìng  
而且 Ø<sup>1</sup> 最 不 喜 欢 小 孩 子, 可 是 Ø<sup>1</sup> 听 了 这 些 话, Ø<sup>1</sup> 心 上 高 兴。

more most not like little kids, but hear PRT these words, heart PRT happy. (Miss Su had always scorned the poor, simple-minded Mrs. Sun and detested children, but when she heard all that, she was quite pleased.)

$$T_1-R_1 \Rightarrow \emptyset_1-R_2 \Rightarrow \emptyset_1-R_3 \Rightarrow \dots \Rightarrow \emptyset_n-R_n$$

Figure 4. Constant-theme pattern (b)

9) Ø<sup>1</sup> gěi hóng jiàn dǐng le yī jù, tā (T<sup>1</sup>) dǎo bù xiàng yì guó tǒnglǐng de pāi zhuō dàhǒu,  
或 德 国 元 首 的 扬 拳 示 威。

For Hung-chien retort a word, he not like Italian ruler PRT slash desk shout,

huò déguó yuánshǒu de yáng quán shìwēi  
或 德 国 元 首 的 扬 拳 示 威。

or German president PRT raise hands show power. (But when he encountered a retort from Hung-chien, he could neither pound nor roar like the Italian ruler or raise a fist in a shout of authority like the German leader.)

$$\emptyset_1-R_1 \Rightarrow \emptyset_1-R_2 \Rightarrow \emptyset_1-R_3 \Rightarrow \dots \Rightarrow T_1-R_n$$

Figure 5. Constant-theme pattern (c)

### 3.3 Constant-Rhyme Pattern

In this pattern, the themes of the clauses are different while the rhymes remain the same. This structure can be observed in comparing a group of different things within a group of simple sentence structures. The sequence of discourse flow can be shown as figure 6. See examples (10) and (11).

$$T_1-R_1 \Rightarrow T_2-R_1 \Rightarrow T_3-R_1 \Rightarrow \dots \Rightarrow T_n-R_1$$

Figure 6. Constant-rhyme pattern

10) Tom (T<sup>1</sup>) was fired (R<sup>1</sup>). Jim (T<sup>2</sup>) was fired (R<sup>1</sup>). A lot of people (T<sup>3</sup>) were fired yesterday (R<sup>1</sup>).

11) yànzi qù le (T<sup>1</sup>), yǒu zài lái de shíhòu (R<sup>1</sup>),  
燕 子 去 了 (T<sup>1</sup>), 有 再 来 的 时 候 (R<sup>1</sup>),

Swallows go PRT, have more come PRT time,

yángliǔ kū le (T<sup>2</sup>), yǒu zài qīng de shíhòu (R<sup>1</sup>),  
杨 柳 枯 了 (T<sup>2</sup>), 有 再 青 的 时 候 (R<sup>1</sup>),

willows wither PRT, have more green PRT time,

táohuā xiè le (T<sup>3</sup>), yǒu zài kāi de shíhòu (R<sup>1</sup>).  
桃 花 谢 了 (T<sup>3</sup>), 有 再 开 的 时 候 (R<sup>1</sup>).

peach blossoms fade PRT, have more open PRT time. (If swallows go away, they will come back again. If willows wither, they will turn green again. If peach blossoms fade, they will flower again.)

In this section, we have discussed the basic thematic progression patterns used in English and Chinese. There

may be other patterns which are applied by the writer to organize his discourse. In this paper, we only focus on these three basic patterns and their correspondent translation strategies for these patterns.

#### 4. Strategies for Translating Thematic Progression Patterns in English and Chinese

As shown above, the analysis of thematic progression pattern is based on the discourse analysis, not just the syntactic linguistic level. Thus, the translation of thematic progression patterns is a kind of discourse translation which has been increasingly emphasized by many translation theorists, such as Catford (1965), Bell (1991), Baker (1992) and House (1997), etc. Here, this paper only concentrates on the transformation between the same thematic progression pattern in English and Chinese. Since the thematic progression pattern is concerned with the organization of a discourse, we will borrow the concept “structural shift” which is originated by Catford (1965) as a key policy for the mutual translation of thematic progression patterns used in English and Chinese. Structural shift includes two ways. One is the shift between form concordance structure and semantic concordance structure and the other is the shift between the overt logic relation and the covert logic relation. These two ways will be discussed here.

##### 4.1 Shifts between Form Concordance Structure and Semantic Concordance Structure

Before we discuss the concrete operative ways for structural shift between the thematic progression pattern used in English and Chinese, let us answer this question: why do we have different presentations of thematic progression patterns in English and Chinese? Xu (1991) argues that, English texts and Chinese texts are organized differently. He points out that English texts are organized by following the “form concordance”, while Chinese texts are organized according to the “semantic concordance”. Thus, English language highlights the consistency between subject and predicate and the logic relations among the parts of the sentence, while Chinese focuses on the semantic sequence order which is correspondent to the flow of peoples’ thought. Therefore, in English, the subject is an indispensable component, and is located before the predicate verb and conforms with it in person, number, tense, aspect and so on. In Chinese, however, the subject can often be left out because the sentence is organized by the semantic flow of thoughts; especially subjects with no semantic function, such as phantom or “false” subject (it, there) in English never exist in Chinese. For example, *It was John who helped me out of trouble*. Here, “it” is not the real subject, it is the “false” subject. The real subject is “the person who helped me out of trouble”. As a result, the key to Chinese-English structural transference for thematic progression pattern is to determine the actor or the subject according to the context, and then find the predication. In this case, the anaphorically or cataphorically left out theme must be replaced by pronouns or proper nouns for we cannot find a clause begins without a theme except the imperative clause in English. See examples (5), (8) and (9).

##### 4.2 Shifts between Overt Logic Relation and Covert Logic Relation

Since Chinese language is developed and organized according to the sequence of thought, the semantic relations are realized through the meaning, not by using the conjunctions to show the logic relations among the clauses. Then, we can see there is a covert logic relation among the clauses of a discourse. With English, however, this is not the case because English discourse is developed and organized by the form concordance. Then, we can find that there are overt logic relations among the clauses and these overt logic relations are realized by using all sorts of conjunctions. This research finding helps us a lot when we do mutual translation of English and Chinese. For instance, if we comb out the logic relations among the sense groups of a thematic progression pattern in Chinese, then we can successfully shift the logic relations from covert ones to overt ones. See example (2) and example (11). In (2), there is a hypothetical semantic relationship between the two clauses in Chinese. Hence, we should add the conjunctive word “if” to connect these two clauses and show the assumptive relationship of these two clauses when we translate them into English. In (11), there are six clauses which can be divided into three groups of clauses. In each group of clauses, we can observe the same assumptive semantic relationship as we have observed in (2). That is the reason why we use the same way to translate these clauses as we have done with example (2). However, when there are structural and habitual differences and conflicts between the source language and the target language, the translator should make proper transformation and adjustment to make it conform to the habitual usages of the target language expressions.

#### 5. Conclusion

Following a comparative analysis of the three basic thematic progression patterns used in English and Chinese, structural shift policy has been proposed for their mutual translation. These discussions of thematic progression patterns aim at abandoning the way of translation based on the sentence syntactic level, but taking the author’s weaving way of text and communicative intention and logic into consideration at the discourse level. Hence, the strategies provided here are expected to be operative and effective for a translator’s practical operation. In this

paper, only the three basic thematic progression patterns are discussed, there may be other specific thematic progression patterns in English and Chinese. Therefore, the further corresponding strategies are deserved to be argued.

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