

Thematic Progression in English and Arabic Texts

Mohammad Fawzi M. Mohammad Ph. D.
Dept. of English - Al-Tahady University

Introduction

1. Statement of the Problem

Having worked as an instructor of English for many years in more than an Arab university, I have had the opportunity to notice that the students always face difficulty in developing their language skills and they show noticeable deficiencies in producing English written texts.

The problem with most of these students does not lie in a gap in the knowledge of grammar but because they suffer from an inconsistent and in many cases deplorably deficient approximation to native like composition. Such a situation is attributable to a number of factors, the most prominent of which are the differences in cultures and other text conventions which constrain text in Arabic and English.

Thus, I decided to approach the problem by conducting a contrastive study which will show the differences in the thematic progression between Arabic and English argumentative texts.

2. Importance of the study

The importance of this study stems from the attempt to find a solution to a problem facing many Arab learners of English, i.e. transferring Arabic

conventions of composition writing into English.

Besides, a contrastive analysis study at the thematic progression level is of great importance to language teachers, applied linguists and syllabus designers and others whose concern is related in one way or another to ELT (English Language Teaching) in the Arab world.

3. Limitation of the study

This study is restricted by a number of factors and I feel that this should be clarified from the outset:

- (1) This study limited to explore the similarities and differences in one aspect of text convention, i. e. thematic progression.
- (2) The study is also limited to one text-type, i. e. argumentative text, leaving other text types to other researchers to explore.
- (3) The number of text used in this study is limited to two: one Arabic argumentative text and another one in English. This is due to limitation of time and space.

4. Hypothesis

In text creation Arabic and English achieve thematic progression in different ways; and this will be tested by using the theme/ rheme division of the clause as it will be expanded in the method of analysis.

5. Selection of data

My analysis is based on a comparison of one set of argumentative parallel texts, which are taken from Al-Jumhuriya newspaper (see Appendix 1), and the Guardian (see Appendix 2).

Since we are dealing written texts then our concern here is with modern standard Arabic and modern standard English , i. e. journalism.

the selected texts are parallel in nature. Both texts, in fact, are argumentative and both deal with similar subjects: the importance of preserving language.

Thematic Progression (TP)

1. What is a text ?

A text, for me, is a communicative phenomenon functioning within a context. In other words, a text can be described as language in operation and it is the means to present discourse in actual communication. Its size is immaterial since a communicative phenomenon may have the surface format of a single sentence (cf. Mohammad 1990).

What differentiates a text from non-text is its adherence to its constituents. According to Halliday (1986) a text is a product of three constituents: (1) Context of Situation, (2) Thematic Progression and (3) Cohesion. These factors actually match extralinguistic and linguistic features together. However, I don't want in this paper to discuss the above three factors since our study is limited to one feature only: TP.

2. What is Thematic Progression (TP) ?

As mentioned before the unity of text is not only maintained by context of situation but also by cohesion and TP. Cohesion can be seen as sentence connectivity and TP is the continuity of theme which strengthens the conceptual tightness of the text. This conceptual tightness makes TP one of the main characteristics which constitute a text in general.

The best example which illustrates the theory of TP in texts is the work on the theme/rheme which was presented by Mathesius (1936) and later developed by other linguists like Frawley (1964/1974) and Danes (1974). The work on theme/rheme is known now as Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP). In my view, the concept of FSP can be considered a major contribution to the study of text because it shows how " The line of argument " passes from one sentence to the whole text. It also helps to illustrate the development of flow of communication in the text. In other , a text cannot be coherent without TP.

The interrelation between the FSP and the organisation of the text has been formulated by Danes on the basis of the theme/rheme concept. He conceives of this interrelation through TP, and he finds an important aspect of what he refers to as the communicative dynamism (CD) of a text in the distribution of theme/rheme. The theme is defined as those elements which contain the lowest degree of CD, while the rheme carries more CD than the theme. However, Danes (1974:118) has identified three patterns of TP:

(A) A simple linear TP with linear thematization of rhemes as shown in the following example.

The combine-harvester has revolving arms at the front, known as a reel. The reel pushes the crop stems towards a cutter -bar. This cutter- bar chips off the stems near the ground.

T 1 _____ R 1

T2 (=R1) _____ R2

T3 (=R2) _____ R3

Figure 1: Pattern (A)

(B) TP with a continuous theme, e.g.

Al-Khwarizmi was a great Arab scientist. He was specially great in mathematics, astronomy, history and geography. He also knows a lot about music. He was the first.....

T1_____R1

T2(T1)_____R2

T3(T2)_____R3

Figure 2: Pattern (B)

(C) The third pattern is characterized by a main theme (Hypertheme) and derived themes as shown below.

Libya is an Arab country lies in north Africa.
The capital of the country is Tripoli. Other
important cities are: Bebhazi, Musrata
and Sirte. The climate in summer is hot, but
in winter it is cold.....

Hypertheme

T1__R1

T2____R2

T3____R3

Figure 3: Pattern (C)

IT is clear from the above line of argument that the text is seen as a thread and TP or CD shows how meaning is carried through this thread. In other words, the theme serves as a point of departure for the development of the semantic progression and as framework for this development in the text. This explanation of the theme's role is in fact similar to Halliday's " information structure" except that it is

operating within the domain of the clause or sentence and not of the information unit or tone group (see Halliday 1977, 1985).

Halliday's view as far as thematization is concerned, is somehow similar to the Prague linguists (Mathesius, Fibras and Danes). By thematisation, Halliday refers to the arrangement of clauses in a form that imparts information. The theme is conceived of by Halliday (1977, 1985) as the first element in the clause which is true to languages which display sentence order of subject-verb-object (The cat killed the pigeon). But Williams (1982: 121) found Halliday's definition of theme inadequate for the treatment of Arabic. He offers two reasons for such inadequacy. One is the frequent sentence order verb-subject-object as (qatata lqitu lhamaamata). The second is the " freer word order " in Arabic compared with English (ibid). He therefore, opts for the Prague school linguists' (FSP), according to which theme and rheme are designated in view of their communicative dynamism (CD).

Thematic Progression (TP) in Arabic and English Argumentative Texts

1. Method of analysis

In my analysis of the TP in the two texts forming my data, I shall follow Danes' (1974) CD , as mentioned before. The difference between my model and that of Danes' is that I am not using the sentence as a unit of analysis. My unit of analysis is the clause which can be defined as " Any number of word group combining to express a process , relating either explicitly or implicitly an 'agent' and an 'affected' " (CF Williams 1982:21). The theme then is that element of the clause which carries the least CD and it is recoverable from the context, and the rheme is that element which carries the highest degree of CD. It is important to mention here that the position of theme in the clause, whether it is at the beginning or not, is immaterial to our scheme of analysis.

2. The analysis

In this section I will investigate the most frequent thematic pattern in my argumentative texts. It is worth mentioning that argumentative texts are those texts in which the writer tries to convince the readers with his point of view.

For the purpose of illustrating the TP in text (A) (see appendix 1) , the text has been split into twenty clauses. In the following figure we will outline the progression of theme through the clauses forming the text, which is an Arabic text.

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. T1_____R1 | 12. T12(T5)_____R12 |
| 2. T2(T1)_____R2 | 13. T13(T12)_____R13 |
| 3. T3(T1)_____R3 | 14. T14(T13)_____R14 |
| 4. T4(R3)_____R4 | 15. T15(R14)_____R15 |
| 5. T5(T3)_____R5 | 16. T16(R15)_____R16 |
| 6. T6(R5)_____R6 | 17. T17(R15)_____R17 |
| 7. T7(R6)_____R7 | 18. T18(R17)_____R18 |
| 8. T8(R7)_____R8 | 19. T19(R18)_____R19 |
| 9. T9(R8)_____R9 | 20. T20(R19)_____R20 |
| 10. T10(R)_____R10 | |
| 11. T11(10)_____R11 | |

Figure 4: TP in the Arabic Text (A)

Examining the above figure, one can notice that the first theme (T1) is repeated in the first three clauses in the text. In the first three clauses it is implicitly stated in the verb "awadu" (I would like) and in " aquulu" (I say). While in the third clause the theme is explicitly stated in "innii"(I). The PT of these three clauses give pattern (A) (see Figure 1).

Since these clauses are scene setter, then they demonstrate exposition of information. But when we move on to argumentation the pattern changes. In clause (4) the theme is the rheme of the previous clause. While the theme in clause (5) is the same theme of clause (4).

From clause (6) to clause (11) the theme of each clause is the rheme of the preceding clause giving pattern (B) (see Figure 2). It seems that this pattern is used as a device to express argumentation rather than mere exposition.

This pattern breaks in clause (12) where there is a fluctuation in the TP because the theme in clause (12), which is (implicit we) refers back to the same theme of clause (5).

Then pattern (A) (see Figure 1) recur. From clause (16) pattern (B) appears again. In clause (17) there is another fluctuation in TP because its theme is not related to the preceding clause, but to clause (15). In the rest of the clauses (18- 20) pattern (B) is obvious again.

In short, the predominant pattern of TP in this text is pattern (B) and although pattern (A) also appears it is less frequent. On the other hand, the text shows repetition of the theme through many clauses and in clauses (12- 16).

Text (B), which is an English argumentative text (see appendix 2) in turn is split into (15) clauses. The TP through out these clauses is as follows:

- | | |
|---------------------|----------------------|
| 1. T1 _____R1 | 12. T12 (T1_____R12) |
| 2. T2_____R2 | 13. T13(R12)_____R13 |
| 3. T3 _____R3 | 14. T14(T2)_____R14 |
| 4. T4 (T2)_____R4 | 15. T15 (14)_____R15 |
| 5. T5 T4)_____R5 | |
| 6. T6 (T5)_____R6 | |
| 7. T7 (T6)_____R7 | |
| 8. T8 (R7)_____R8 | |
| 9. T9 (R8)_____R9 | |
| 10. T10(T9)____R10 | |
| 11. T11 (R10)___R11 | |

Figure 5 : TP in the English Text (B)

Figure (5) shows that TP is not repeated in the second clause. In other words, each clause has its own theme which is bound to overall theme of the text. The theme of clause (3) is actually the rheme of clause (2) which gives pattern (B) (see figure: 2). In clause (4) there is fluctuation in the theme because its theme (I) is actually the theme of clause (2). Then from clause (4 to 6) the theme is repeated giving (A). From clause 7 to 11) pattern (B) is the most frequent one.

In clause (12) there is another fluctuation in the theme because its theme refers back to the theme of the topic clause (1). Then pattern (B) appears again towards the end of the text. However, similar to the Arabic text (A), the English text (B) also displays a frequent use of pattern (B) which as I said before represents a turbulence motivated by argumentation.

3. Conclusions

One obvious conclusion which can be drawn from the comparison of TP in the two argumentative texts is that in the Arabic text (A) there is a tendency to repeat the theme in successive clauses forming the text more frequently in comparison with the English text (B).

It is also obvious that in the Arabic text (A) the theme is more explicitly stated than in the English text (B).

In both texts the pre-dominant pattern is (B) which is always pre-dominant in argumentative texts.

(B) T1_____R1

T2(R1)_____R2

4. Concluding Remarks

I hope the above differences and similarities between the Arabic and English argumentative texts, will serve in facilitating the job of syllabus designers and textbook writers in the Arab world. I also hope that the results of this contrastive analysis will show the Arab students how the flow of communication in Arabic and English argumentative texts are achieved. Besides, Arab students of English should keep in mind not to repeat always the theme of the clauses when writing an argumentative text in English. At last, I hope other researchers will test the results gained in this study against more comprehensive data.

References:

Danes, F. (1974) " Functional Sentence Perspective and Organization of Text. " In Papers on Functional Sentence Perspective . F. Danes (ed) Moulton, The Hague.

Fibras, J. (1964) " On Defining the Functional Sentence Analysis " In TIP, pp. 267-280.

Fibras, J. (1974) " Some Aspects of the Czechoslovak Approach to problems of FSP " . In Papers on FSP. Mouton, The Hague.

Halliday. M. A. (1977) " Text as Semantic Choice in Special Context".
In Grammar and Descriptions

Halliday, M. A. (1985) An Introduction to Functional Grammar.
Deaken University Press.

Halliday, M. A. (1986) Language, Context and Text (part 1).
Deaken University Press.

Mohammad, M.F.M. (1990) Communicative Use of Parallel Texts.
Unpublished PH.D. Theses, University of Salford, England.

Williams, M. (1982) A Contrastive Analysis of Text Cohesion and Development in Arabic and English. Unpublished M.A. Dissertation
University of Leeds, England

Appendix 1

Text A

لغتنا الجميلة ...
والمحافظة عليها

اود ان اورد تعقيبا" على موضوع للناشرين واقول لهما اتى افق السى جاتبهما في كل كلمة وردت في زاوية (نور و ظلام) بجريدة الجمهورية الغراء العدد 6538 والذي جاء تحت عنوان (الغاء التاء العربية المربوطة في اللغة العربية).
نعم نلاحظ بعض الاهمال من الكتاب والاعلاميين والاذاعيين في اللغة ويبدو هذا راجعا للاسف الى المحيط الذي درسوا فيها هذه اللغة حيث ان الخطأ اللغوي لدى الكثير من طلاب المدارس الابتدائية والثانوية وحتى الجامعة أمر يكاد ان يكون شائعا . وهذا يدعونا الى الخوف على لغتنا الام والتي لا بما يأتيها عصر الانقراض . وهذه اللغة التي نزل فيها القرآن الكريم كيف نهملها ونتصرف بأبجديتها كيفما نشاء ؟
يجب علينا ان نتعاون جميعا مدرسين ومربين ومعلمين وأباء وان نعلم اطفالنا لغتهم الصحيحة التي تربطهم بأشقاتهم العرب في كل مكان وكل زمان . كما يجب علينا الاعتناء بتدريس هذه اللغة لطلاب المراحل المتقدمة والجامعات ايضا لكي يتقنوا قواعد السليمة مما يساعدنا على اعداد رجل المستقبل والغد المشرق الذي ربما يكون مدرسا او قاضيا او عالما
السخ

محمد هاشم

جريدة الجمهورية القاهرة 26 / 5 / 1995

Appendix 2

Text B

The kingman report rightly concentrates on what should be done in junior schools to improve the mastery of English (1), but I have much anecdotal evidence (2), that semi-literacy is rife at the very peak of the educational pyramid (3). I teach MA and MSc students (4), supervise Ph.D. students (5) and edit a learned journal (6).

Each of these involvements with a tiny elite of the most highly educated people continually leaves me astonished at the prevailing degree of ignorance of the structure of language (7). " Sentences " without main verbs are constructed routinely (8), use of the semicolon is an arcane enigma (9), the comma is frequently used to join two sentences (10) , each with its own main verb (11).

Kingman-based reforms in junior schools will lead to improvements (12) which will percolate through eventually (13). My experience of the semi-literacy of the highly educated suggests, however (14), that action is also needed at once in sixth forms and universities (15).

(Prof) P. B. Checland
Lancaster.

The Guardian
Tuesday May 10. 1995