



A Study on Thematic Progression Patterns in Listening Comprehension Texts and Its Teaching Implication

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Abstract

According to Halliday's Systemic-Functional Grammar, this article analyzes the features of thematic progression patterns in CET-4 listening comprehension texts. With the basic unit "sentence", this article discusses the internal logic relations in listening comprehension texts and the information decoding features in the process. Besides, it also provides inspiration for listening teaching in college.

Key words: Theme; Rheme; Thematic progression patterns; Listening comprehension text

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INTRODUCTION

Whether in daily life or classroom, students always do more listening than speaking. In learning English, four basic skills are often mentioned: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Previous study showed different time proportion in life: listening (40%-50%), speaking (25%-30%), reading (11%-16%), and writing (9%). Listening comprehension (LC), as one of the four language skills, plays a major role in communication. However, it represents one of the most difficult tasks for language learners and probably the most neglected skill in language teaching.

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The Chinese College English syllabus has some requirements for students' listening comprehension. According to 2006 Revised Edition, the score value in listening part has greatly enhanced from 20% to 35%, in which dialogue accounts for 15% and texts being 20%. Moreover, instead of 120 words per minute, listening scripts are interpreted in standard British English or American English at a speed of 130 words per minute. In fact, some students cannot understand the teachers mean in class, let alone grasp the general idea or details, infer the opinion and attitude of the speaker.

If we carefully examine the present situation of listening comprehension teaching in most colleges, we can easily detect some common characteristics of the traditional way of teaching. In a typical traditional Chinese college listening class, teachers often do the following steps: a) explaining some new words and phrases; b) introducing background information related to the upcoming text; c) playing the tape for the first time and asking students to listen carefully and gap the general idea; d) replaying the tape and let students finish the comprehension exercises; e) checking answers to the questions and f) playing the tape again and again without any or little further explanation about listening skills or strategies. During this process, teachers' task is simply playing the tape and checking the answers, and students are not receiving any help in finding out how

process this unfamiliar language. They are called upon to answer comprehension questions whether or not they have understood. The teaching of listening is a long way from developing students' LC competence, and it seems so much like testing rather than teaching.

It is a typical traditional listening teaching approach, outcomes of listening are more critical than the process, and the emphasis is on individual sentence rather than the whole text. Obviously, this traditional sentence-oriented teaching approach cannot meet the need for conveying the information. To solve this problem, a discourse-oriented approach of listening to teaching is recommended.

Although discourse analysis is a comparatively new field, the research into discourse analysis has seen a considerable growth in language teaching circles. Some theories in this field are extremely important for improving students' LC ability. Theme and thematic progression (TP) are one of the major research topics in discourse analysis. It focuses on the features of themes and their development in the entire discourse. Previous study was trying to apply TP patterns in various fields, such as reading, writing, and translating. Then successful feedbacks were generated in improving students' ability. However, few are touched in the field of listening from the aspect of TP, which offers an impetus for this study. Therefore, this article is intended to study the features of TP patterns in LC texts, and it is hoped that the results can help the listening teaching and learning.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Definition of the Terms

Halliday illustrated the theme and rheme in his works *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* as follows:

In English, as in many other languages, the clause is organized as a message by having a special status assigned to one part of it. One element in the clause is enunciated as the theme; this then combines with the remainder so that the two parts together constitute a message. (Halliday, 2000, pp.37-38)

He thinks the position of theme is at the beginning of the clause and be always in the beginning position. Based on these, it can be concluded into theme + rheme as message structure.

Such examples of theme + rheme message structure are given in the following table:

Table 1
Theme-Rheme Structure

The audience	Has given the boy warm applaudes.
The boy	Has been given warm applaudes by the audience.
Warm applaudes	The audience has given to the boy.
Theme	Rheme

From the above examples we can find that there is an obvious difference in emphases, though they refer to the same event. The difference can be identified as "thematic".

They vary in choosing of theme. In other words, it is concluded that theme refers to the element which is the point of departure for the message and appears always at the beginning of the sentence. It is what the sentence concerned; whereas rheme is usually the remainder of the message, which is the development of the theme. According to this rule, the following examples can be divided into the structure of theme-rheme. Among them, T refers to theme whereas R refers to rheme and the sign of "[]" is used to divide the theme and rheme. Hereinafter the same.

Some people (T) | ant to make and save a lot of money in order to retire early. (R)

For example, farmers (T) brought a bag of grain in exchange for a ticket. (R)

If he has ambitious goals and is willing to put in long hours (T), | everyone in his unit will follow his example. (R)

As the examples shown above, theme could be a word, a phrase, or a clause. Its position varies from different types of sentences.

As has been mentioned above, an independent sentence has the character of a message, which is the realized by theme and rheme; However, the success of a text does not only lie on the individual sentence level, but also on the development of theme and rheme at the whole text level. The arrangement of theme and rheme of clauses in a coherent discourse is regular when forming a text, it is not randomly combined. The pattern of the arrangement between theme and rheme is identified as "thematic progression pattern".

1.2 Classification

Danes (1974) was the first linguist who put forward TP patterns. He thinks TP might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot. Based on a large amount of language materials, he points out four basic patterns of TP, i.e. simple linear ($T2=R1$), constant theme ($T2=T1$), derived theme ($T=T1+T2$) and split rheme ($R=R1+R2$).

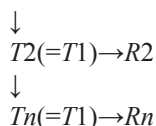
Other scholars both at home and abroad also propose different TP patterns, such as Bloor proposes four patterns (T. Bloor & M. Bloor, 2001), Xu (1982) points out four patterns of theme-rheme development, Soon afterwards Huang Yan (1985) puts forward seven patterns of TP, and Zhu (1995) in his article "Thematic Progression and the Discourse Analysis" offers a four-pattern model.

With the inspiration from those linguists' attempts, seven patterns are concluded as the basic categories in this article. They are as follows: ($T1, T2, \dots$ is used to refer to theme numbers in each sentence and $R1, R2, \dots$ is used to refer to rheme numbers. Hereinafter the same.)

1.2.1 Constant Theme

The typical feature of this pattern is that the theme of the first sentence is employed as the theme of the subsequent sentence, which is clearly represented as follows:

$$T1 \rightarrow R1$$

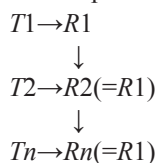


For example:

John (*T1*) // asked for music (*R1*). He (*T2*) // dictated his will (*R2*). He (*T3*) // wrote a long letter in Latin (*R3*). He (*T4*) // bade goodbye to his brother (*R4*).

1.2.2 Constant Rheme

The typical feature of this pattern is that the rheme of the first sentence is continuously employed as the rheme of the following sentence. The relationship is showed in the following diagram and example:

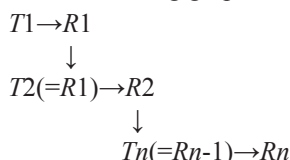


For example:

Basketball (*T1*) // is a kind of sport (*R1*). Football (*T2*) // is also a kind of sport (*R2*). We (*T3*) // like sports (*R3*).

1.2.3 Simple Linear Pattern

The typical feature of this pattern is that the rheme in the precedent sentence is the theme of the subsequent sentence, and in this way, the information goes from the old information to the new information, which can be illustrated from the following graph and the example.



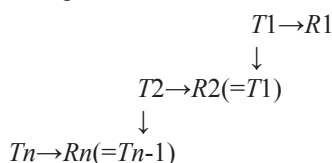
For example:

One evening in spring (*T1*) //, a man and a woman moved into a new house (*R1*). Just outside their door (*T2*) //, there was a garden (*R2*). It (*T3*) // was a pretty garden, with flowers and grass and even a tree (*R3*).

(In the above example, “the house” and “the door” belong to the relation of “whole-part”, “garden” is substituted by pronoun “it”.)

1.2.4 Crossed Pattern

The typical feature of this pattern is that the rheme of the latter sentence is the theme of the former sentence, and the relationship is illustrated in the following pattern:



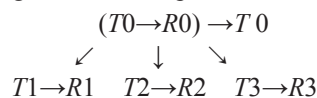
For example:

The play (*T1*) // was interesting (*R1*), but I (*T2*) // didn't enjoy it (*R2*). A young man and a young woman (*T3*) // were sitting behind me (*R3*). Some one (*T4*) // was talking with them loudly (*R4*). I (*T5*) // gave that person

a dirty look (*R5*), but nobody (*T6*) // paid any attention to me (*R6*).

1.2.5 Derived Themes

The typical feature of this pattern is that the former whole sentence can be regarded as a “hypertheme”, and then the subsequent themes in the following sentences derive from the “hypertheme”, which can be represented in the following diagram and example:



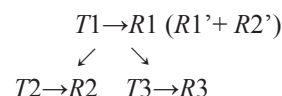
For example:

Different people (*T0*) // have different remedies for colds (*R0*). In the United States and some other countries (*T1*) //, for example, people might eat chicken soup to feel better (*R1*). Some people (*T2*) // take hot baths and drink warm liquids (*R2*). Other people (*T3*) // take medicines to relieve various symptoms of colds (*R3*).

(Just like the above example, “different people” is divided into ‘United States and some other countries’, and ‘other people’)

1.2.6 Split Rheme

The typical feature of this pattern is that the rheme of the former sentence include two parts and each part will be the theme of the next part, which can be illustrated like follows:



For example:

I (*T1*) // have a sister and a brother (*R1*). My sister (*T2*) // is a teacher (*R2*). My brother (*T3*) // is a businessman (*R3*).

1.2.7 Mixed Pattern

Of all the patterns showed above, the whole passage can be covered. Some sentences don't construct any pattern above, so in order to make the article more specific and clear, a mixed pattern is referred to conclude the unknown ones.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

The Testing Syllabus for CET4 has been revised in 2006 by The National College English Testing Committee. In this sense, 48 CET4 new type LC texts are collected from June 2006 to December 2013 as the corpus materials. In this article, the basic unit “sentence” is employed to make the analysis on the division of theme and rheme, and the TP patterns. The CET-4 LC texts are downloaded from the official website: <http://www.examw.com/CET4/Listen>. As for the convenience of analysis, the texts are marked as 0606-1 (i.e. CET-4 LC Text One in June 2006, hereafter the similar).

3. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Analysis Results

Based on the TP patterns mentioned above, seven TP patterns of each LC texts are analyzed, and the research results are listed in the following Table 2 and Figure 1:

Table 2
Distributions of Seven TP Patterns in Samples

Seven TP patterns	Constant theme	Same rheme	Simple linear	Crossed pattern	Derived theme	Split rheme	Mixed patterns
Number	368	166	105	25	7	4	10

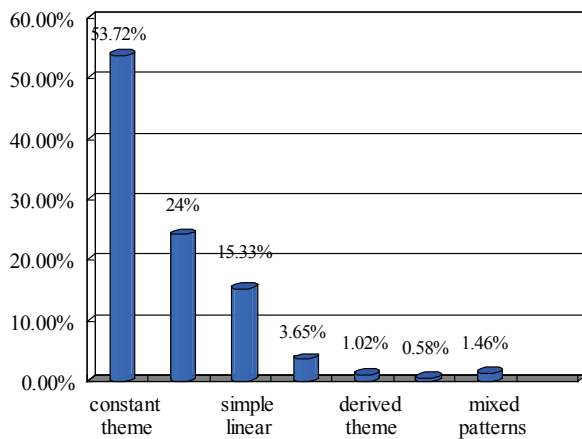


Figure 1
Distributions of Fouth TP Patterns in Samples

Among these patterns, constant theme pattern is the most frequent one taking up almost half of the total number. The reason is that constant theme pattern connects the theme with topic very closely, and it makes the information around one core thus the whole text is intensive. This function is significant for LC texts because the specificity of LC part in CET-4 to deliver through radio or tape, listeners have to quickly grasp the main idea just through listening and can not listen to it once again like what they do when doing the reading comprehension in the exam. The theme occurs in the initial place of each sentence, such as repeating

Table 3
The Theme and Rheme Part of Each Sentence in the Sample

Sentence No.	Theme	Rheme
1	In her first speech, Patricia Pania	Got off to a shaky start
2	She	Was visibly trembling and her voice was soft and uncertain
3	But as she	Got into her speech, a dramatic transformation took place
4	She	Stopped shaking and spoke with a strong voice
5	For the rest of her talk, she	Was a forceful and compelling speaker
6	She	Wanted everyone in the audience to know what she knew without having to learn it from a personal tragedy

It is easy to notice from the above figure that constant theme pattern (368 times, 53.72%) occurs most frequently, then same rheme pattern (166 times, 24%), the third is the simple linear pattern (105 times, 15.33%), then the crossed pattern (25 times, 3.65%), while other three patterns occur few times.

names, places or events. With this function, listeners can spend less time and effort comprehending the coming new information and feel easy and more effective to understand the following the text.

The same rheme pattern ranks second. As mentioned above, the new information usually occurs in the rheme part and is more complicated than theme. Because rheme part is the end part of every clause, when they are repeated it may gives a much stronger impression on the listeners. Therefore listener's attention can be aroused.

The third one is simple linear pattern which provides a story-telling way to help listeners build up a set boundary of the information. It can achieve smooth progression in the text and represent the sequence of event. From the analysis, it can be concluded that simple linear pattern is effective in procedure description of events or stories. As most of the LC texts in the exam are descriptive, the linear pattern enables listeners to logically receive a series of detailed messages and build up a stock of information. The other four patterns occur few in the samples.

3.2 Sample Analysis

In this part, one paragraph was chosen from 0701-2 as an example to show how the above procedures are employed. Let's look at the example below:

Based on Halliday's theory of identifying theme and rheme mentioned in 2.1, the theme and rheme part of each sentence in the sample is identified and clearly shown in the following Table 3:

In the above example, it is clearly that the themes are all identical to T1—*Patricia Pania*, thus we can draw a conclusion that this example makes a description of *Patricia Pania*. Of all the samples analyzed in CET-4 LC texts, a large amount is about the description on somebody or something. Such examples can also find in 0606-3, 0706-1, 0706-3, 0801-2, etc. The common feature of such kind of description is that it employs constant theme pattern frequently, thus if listeners get the main theme, they can get the main idea immediately. Because the theme correlates closely with the topic, then listeners can get the theme around the topic in a limited time. What's more, as it fits the rule of information process, it is easy for listeners to follow the addressor's thought.

Besides, the rheme of the first clause is continuously employed as the rhemes of the second clause. R2 describes the vivid shaky appearance of *Patricia Pania* --visibly trembling and her voice was soft and uncertain. R4 and R5 describe the exact appearance of how a dramatic transformation took place in her speech. Such examples can also find in 0701-1, 0701-2, 0706-2, 0906-3, 1001-3, etc.. As mentioned above, the new information usually occurs in the rheme part and is more complicated than theme. As LC texts provide the relevant information about and make comments on one topic, most of the sentences are discussing the same thing.

4. APPLICATIONS TO TEACHING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

In addition to above findings, the present research offers some suggestions for CET teaching and learning. In listening class, teachers should provide students with numerous opportunities to perform listening, not merely test their listening abilities. For example, teacher gives the topic of "How to celebrate the Chinese Spring Festival", students may form the picture of serial action and food for celebrating the Spring Festival in China. For this topic is closely related to their life, a vivid experience is constructed to help them draw a picture in their mind. For this point, they are about to understand the listening content. What's more, a series of relevant words and phrases are listed in advance. Such as fireworks, Spring Festival couplets, paper-cuts, New Year paintings, dumplings, gift money, give New Year's greetings, etc..

According to the TP patterns theory, students can make the prediction before hear the materials. This will

on some certain ways make the listening material looks so effortless, and then the confidence will back to students. Perhaps the most vital element in learning how to listen effectively in a second or foreign language is confidence, and confidence comes with practice and "Practice makes perfect". The more exercise students did, the more they got in improving the listening ability. These are very the impetus for students to listen during and after the class.

CONCLUSION

This article studies TP patterns in LC texts. It first introduced the significance of listening as well as the existing problems in present listening teaching, and then reviewed the theories of theme and TP patterns, some samples from CET-4 LC texts were given. With the help of one paragraph analysis, finally it offers several suggestions for listening teaching in college.

Like most of the studies in this area concern listening teaching, less attention seems to be paid to whether to combine different strategies into current teaching. Furthermore, strategy or approach in language teaching is still another unresolved issue. In other words, it is still a long way to go in this research area. However, it falls within the competence for each EFL teachers to understand the importance of LC strategies, and apply them in their teaching to give some positively suggestions.

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