

What We Need to Notice While Writing English Texts

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Abstract

It is important that educators apply functional grammar to evaluate English text written by learners. In order to further explore the criteria, the present study focuses on discussing the four features of writing English text: thematic organization, textual cohesion, nominalizations and verbs in the passive form.

Key words: Functional grammar; Thematic organization; Textual cohesion; Nominalization; Passive verb

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INTRODUCTION

Many English learners often ask questions like: "How could my essay text succeed in conveying meaning to the reader?" and "Why my brilliant essays are declined by my teacher and even degraded in CET6?" The answer, in my opinion, is concealed in the comment of the teacher: "excellent content but not well functioning". What "not well functioning" here has no inference that the writer cannot give expression to his own voice but that the readers are unable to understand wholly or partially what the writer intends to convey them.

According to Thompson, functional grammar can be applied to "evaluate the text: to show why it is (or is not) worth valuing... Functional Grammar allows us to

describe objectively the appropriate patterns of language use in specified contexts; it can help to clarify the often intuitive and subjective criteria on which assessment... is based" (Thompson, 1996, p.223). Thus, as students whose writing works would be judged according to, more or less, these criteria, we need to explore a short cut so as to make our writing works neatly.

Briefly, my paper covers following features: thematic organization, textual cohesion, nominalizations and verbs in the passive form. All were considered in terms of their functional acceptability and their grammatical accuracy in relation to conveying the meaning.

1. THEME/RHEME

Halliday takes the Theme as the initial constituent within the clause: "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned." He also says that it is developed in "the Rheme" which is "the remainder of the message" within the clause (1994, p.37).

Themes can be marked or unmarked. The typical unmarked Theme in English declarative clauses is the subject of the clause. It is realized by the nominal group and contains ideational information. The nominal group can be one word, a noun or pronoun, or a complex group that may even contain an embedded clause. The examples below are thematically connected. In each T-unit the Theme is underlined and the Rheme is the remainder of the unit:

A. Water is essential for life.

B. This means that the freshness and safety of water are important.

C. Both have been a constant concern from earliest times.

In T-unit 2, the Theme represents all the information presented in T-unit 1 with the pronoun acting as an anaphoric reference. This type of cohesion is discussed in

more detail later. In T-unit 3, the Theme takes up the new information presented in the Rheme of T-unit 2.

In contrast, Marked Themes are those where the information is emphasized in some way, which is untypical in English. They may give new information rather than given information, i.e. information that has already been introduced before, often in the preceding Rheme. Most commonly in English emphasis occurs in the Rheme. The examples below follow on from Example 3:

D. The first civilizations settled around rivers.

E. The sinking of wells for fresh water was one of their first achievements.

F. What technology did they use?

In T-unit 4, the Theme is unmarked since it takes up the Rheme in T-unit 3. However, in T-unit 5, the Theme is marked because it presents new information, although “fresh water” does refer to the Rheme of T-unit 2. But the reference to the previous T-unit, 4, occurs in the Rheme with the anaphoric “their”. The Rheme also presents further new information. The Theme in T-unit 6 is marked because it signals the need for further information. Such direct questions are less common in written than in spoken English because of their more informal interpersonal function. Below is another example of marked Theme in subject position:

G. What enabled Darwin to develop his theory of evolution was his discovery of many different species on the Galapagos Islands.

In T-unit 7, the Theme is clearly marked because it emphasizes information that is to be completed in the Rheme.

A marked Theme may also be a circumstantial adjunct that occurs at the beginning of the T-unit before the subject. It takes the form of an adverbial group or prepositional phrase. Halliday identifies nine types: extent, time or place location, manner, cause or reason, contingency, accompaniment, role, matter, angle. Six of these are relevant to the written texts:

- (a) extent
- (b) time or place location
- (c) manner
- (d) cause or reason
- (e) contingency
- (f) angle (or perspective)

An example of each circumstantial adjunct as marked Theme is underlined in the following short texts. The type of adjunct is indicated by the relevant number:

By the early 19th century (a), contamination of city water supplies was becoming serious. There were four cholera outbreaks in Britain between 1831 and 1866 killing thousands. Jon Snow proved that the outbreaks in London were linked to a public well contaminated by privy vaults nearby. When the health hazards of privy vaults became clear (d), people began to discharge their waste into the drainage system designed to take rain-water to rivers.

Through calls for better sanitary conditions by influential campaigners (c), the 1875 Public Health Act came into being. Inspectors were hired to check on standards of water supply and drainage and new sewers were built to separate waste from fresh water supply.

Some scientific forecasts suggest that over the next 30 years the average temperature at the earth’s surface may rise by 2C to 3C. If this does happen (e), the ice at the North and South Poles will start to melt, causing the sea level to rise. At the moment (b), scientists cannot predict what the change will be. Judging from the way the climate seems to have behaved in recent years (f), making reliable predictions is not easy.

There are two more types of Themes in subject position. They contain no ideational information but serve solely to focus attention on the Rheme. These are known as “empty” subjects. Most commonly they are “it”, which has a purely structural function, and “there”, which introduces existential process as in:

It is important not to take clean water for granted.

There are many parts of the world where water purification is a problem.

Pronouns such as “we” may also be used as an empty subject to introduce a generalization about existence.

Sometimes Conjunctions and Conjunctive Adjuncts are positioned at the beginning of the T-unit. They do not themselves carry ideational information but are textual elements that provide “a cohesive bond between two clauses” (Halliday, 1994, p.324). They form a part of the Theme but cannot present it as a whole. Conjunctions provide a paratactic link between two T-units and comprise elements such as “and”, “but” and “or”. Halliday identifies conjunctive adjuncts that signal three types of expansion in the message: Elaboration, Extension (additive or adversative) and Enhancement (1994, p.325).

i) Elaboration is where further clarification or explanatory information is given. It is introduced by such conjunctive adjuncts as: “for example”, “thus”, “in other words”.

ii) Extension is where additional information in support of or in contrast to the information is given. Supporting information, i.e. additive, would be introduced by such conjunctive adjuncts as: “and”, “moreover”, “in addition”, “nor”. Contrasting information, i.e. adversative, is introduced by such conjunctive adjuncts as: “on the contrary”, “apart from that”, “alternatively”.

iii) Enhancement is where the meaning of the previous clause is qualified in some way and thus the text develops. It would be introduced by such conjunctive adjuncts as: “therefore”, “in conclusion”, “on account of this”, “nevertheless”.

iv) Modal adjuncts have an interpersonal function and may also be positioned at the beginning of the T-unit. They express the attitude of the writer but do not give any ideational information.

The two texts below contain examples of conjunctive and modal adjuncts signaling these different types of extension:

The decision to develop wind turbines depends partly on their cost. But additionally, it depends on the effect they will have on the environment. For instance, they would need to be grouped together in wind farms or parks, which may not be aesthetically pleasing for many people.

Like most satellites, ERS-1 uses advanced solar-powered batteries. But the batteries can only store enough energy for one orbit, which takes about 100 minutes to complete. So the first, and most critical, task for the satellite controllers will be to open its solar panels. Fortunately, this operation should not take long.

Here the conjunctive adjunct “But additionally” introduces additive extension and “For instance” introduces elaboration. “But” is an example of an adjunct introducing adversative extension. “so” introduces enhancement. “Fortunately” is a modal adjunct.

Conjunctions, Conjunctive Adjuncts and Modal Adjuncts may occur in many parts of the clause. But this analysis only deals with those that occur at the beginning of the T-unit as a part of the Theme. They are treated as one item using the abbreviation C.

2. TEXTUAL COHESION

The application of textual cohesion in writing has two features: thematic progression using the tool of the Theme/Rheme construct on the one hand, and anaphoric reference, which focuses more on the lexico-grammatical level on the other hand.

2.1 Thematic Progression

Thematic progression, introduced by the Prague School of Linguistics and attributed to Danes (1974), refers to certain kinds of information structure that are created by the sequencing of Theme and Rheme in relation to given/new information—whether the Theme and Rheme contain given or new information, or given and new information; whether emphasis is effected in some way e.g., through a marked Theme or whether given information is delayed in the Rheme. Danes proposed the following four major patterns of thematic progression. They are clearly summarized by Bloor and Bloor (1995) and Alonso Belmonte and McCabe-Hidalgo (1998) below. Each is followed by an example where the Theme is underlined:

i) Simple linear progression: “where an item from the Rheme of the first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause”. In the Rheme it is presented as new information and in the following Theme as given information. For example:

The ancient Greeks used a system of pipes and tunnels to transport water from reservoirs to cities. Pipes were made of clay and glazed on the inside.

Here, “Pipes” in the first Rheme becomes the second Theme.

ii) Constant progression: “where the item in the Theme of the first clause is also selected as the Theme of the following clause”. For example:

The first civilizations settled around rivers. They sank wells for fresh water.

Here, the first Theme becomes the second Theme, indicated by the anaphoric reference, “They”.

iii) Derived hyperthematic progression: “where the particular Themes in subsequent clauses are derived from a “hypertheme” or from the same overriding Theme”. For example:

The search for fresh and safe water has been a constant concern from earliest times. The first civilizations settled around rivers, and one of their first technological achievements was the sinking of wells for fresh water.

As city populations grew, natural water supplies could not keep pace with demand. Ancient peoples solved the problem by building reservoirs for storage, and canals and aqueducts for moving water from sources to settlements.

Here the hypertheme “a constant concern from earliest times” is transformed to “the first civilizations”, “city populations” and “ancient peoples”.

iv) Split progression: “where the Rheme of the first clause is split into two items, each in turn being then taken as a Theme element in the subsequent clause”, as in the following example:

The ancient Greeks used a system of pipes and tunnels to transport water from reservoirs to cities. Pipes were made of clay, cemented together and glazed on the inside. Tunnels were built large enough to encase them.

Here, the two elements “pipes” and “tunnels” in the first Rheme are taken up separately as the two subsequent Themes.

2.2 Anaphoric Reference

Anaphoric references are cohesive devices that “point backwards” to items already mentioned in the text (Halliday, 1994). Two types are: personal reference, where a previously mentioned noun is represented by a personal pronoun e.g., “they”, “his”, “it”; and demonstrative reference to a previously mentioned NG, represented by the use of demonstrative pronouns e.g., “these”, “that.” Another type is called substitution, which is “a linguistic token” (Thompson, 1996). to an item that has just been mentioned: e.g., “the same”, “some”, “the other one”.

Anaphoric referencing occurs in another cohesive device: lexical cohesion, which Bloor (1995) describe as “the use of lexical items in the discourse where the choice of an item relates to the choices that have gone before” (p.100). Two types are: repetition of the same item and the use of a general noun that refers to something specific that has already been mentioned or described, such as: ‘situation’, “incident”, “phenomenon”. Here, repetition of the same item is signified as given information if it is important for thematic progression. Otherwise it is not indicated. However, the use of a general noun referring to

something specific is indicated as an anaphoric reference.

In the following short text the anaphoric references are underlined:

In Darwin's "On the Origin of Species", the author describes the different species of finch he found on each of the Galapagos Islands. These are a group of volcanic islands over 900 km off the coast of South America, in the Pacific Ocean.

"The author" is substituted for "Darwin". The personal pronoun "he" refers to "Darwin" and "the author". The demonstrative pronoun "these" refers to the Galapagos Islands. It is important that they are positioned soon after their referents because this makes them clearly identifiable.

3. NOMINALIZATIONS

Nominalizations are a certain type of NG: a phrase that structurally behaves like a noun. Nominalizations express processes as things. For example, the sentence: "Genes are inherited from parents" can become nominalized into "Genetic inheritance" or "The inheritance of genes". Halliday and Martin (1993) describe nominalization as grammatical metaphor since a process is transformed into a more abstract phenomenon. This is a common feature of scientific discourse. A great deal of information can be compacted through nominalization as Eggins shows in the following example where the logical relationship between two events is expressed: e.g., "The reason for the late submission of my essay was the illness of my children" (2000, p.57). Structurally there are many types of nominalizations that occur in nominal groups as shown in the five sentences below. Each nominalization is underlined and preceded by a number for reference:

H. The process by which we inherit our characteristics depends on 9 structures in our cell nuclei called chromosomes.

I. The relationship between the gene's code and the protein it makes is very precise.

J. The techniques involved in genetic engineering are complicated.

K. They can increase (E) the speed of animal-breeding programmes.

L. Designing plants that grow faster can have world-wide benefits.

In these examples, the nominalizations are quite complex. The nominalization in J is complex since there are two nominalizations brought together; "animal-breeding programmes" is embedded in "the speed". The initial nominalizations in H, "The process", I, "The relationship", and J, "The techniques involved", are also complex through additional embedding that is the result of another process: "inheriting", "making" and "genetic engineering" respectively. The process "called chromosomes" in H is embedded in the NG "structures in our cell nuclei". L describes an action and could be expressed as "The

designing of plants..." Such nominalizations are typical of what Halliday refers to as an "act" (1994, p.248) because it is an action that is being described.

Nominalizations can be simple and complex to different degrees. Here, both types are considered. Simple nominalizations are defined as those that indicate only the result of one process, e.g., "The production of energy"; whereas complex nominalizations are defined as those that indicate that the results of more than one process are involved in some way. For example, in: "the birth rate (of a baby (having an inherited disease))" the results of three processes are involved: a disease that is inherited, an inherited disease that is passed on to a baby, and the fact that a number of babies are born with that kind of disease. Each nominalization is linked through hypotaxis ("of a baby") or embedding ("having an inherited disease") as indicated by the brackets.

4. PASSIVE VERB FORM

Three types of passive verb forms are considered: finite and non-finite, including modal constructions and elliptic forms where only the verb participle is given to represent action. They are typical features of scientific written discourse because they highlight the process rather than the participant or agent and thus can be said to be marked elements. In their finite uses, they can be simple or extremely complex constructions depending on time and modality. Non-finite uses are mainly infinitives. The following two texts contain a variety of examples (underlined). They are numbered as follows:

(i) for finite passive verb forms

(ii) for non-finite verb forms,

(iii) for elliptic forms.

Linnaeus named 5,900 plant species using a binomial system. Today, well over 2000,000 plant species (i) have been identified and (iii) named in this way...If two scientists working separately discover the same plant or animal species in different places, and give it two different names, the name (iii) used is the first one (ii) to be published in a scientific work.

Removing an enzyme from a cell blocks the chemical pathways. This means that the chemicals that (i) would have passed through the enzyme build up very quickly. Ultimately, the cell's chemical balance (i) is destroyed and it fails. The cell's function (i) can be restored only by replacing the enzyme.

They are grouped together as one item in this analysis.

CONCLUSION

A writer cannot always focus on the content part or solely on the structure part. As long as he intends the reader to be aware of his views, he has to find a way of communicating their meanings to the reader and of organizing their selected thematic content in their essays.

An English learner could improve their written work in virtue of knowledge on functional grammar, such as thematic organization, textual cohesion, nominalizations and verbs in the passive form and so on.

The analysis presented in this article has revealed significant differences between the two essays: thematically and structurally intending to display a better explanation. It has not examined linguistic features at the micro level since these tend to detract from the main objective of language use, which is to communicate meaning.

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