The Realization of Theme - Rheme Patterns on Essay Writing: Problems and Impacts on Text Quality

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Introducion

1.1. Theme – Rheme theory

Theme can be defined in various ways, such as "conveying the old or given information" (Babby, 1980, p. 3) or "what the sentence is about" (Witte, 1983, p. 338). This study, however, adopts Halliday and Matthiessen's (2013) definition, which describes theme as "the point of departure of the message" (p. 89). In contrast, rheme refers to "the remainder of the message, the part in which the theme is developed" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013, p. 89) and usually includes unfamiliar or new information (Eggins, 2004).

1.2. Categorization of theme

- **Functional**
  - *Topical*
  - *Textual*
  - *Interpersonal*
- **Structural**
  - *Simple*
  - *Multiple*
  - *Clausal*

1.3. Problems concerning TR

- **Bloor & Bloor (1992) :**
  - *The problem of the brand new Theme*
  - *The problem of the double Rheme,*
  - *The problem of the empty Rheme*
- **Belmonte & Hidalgo (1998)**
  - *Overuse of constant theme, confusing selection of textual Themes,*
  - *overuse of There, It in theme position,*
  - *Themes with unclear reference.*

1.4. Theme – Rheme pattern and text quality

Proper allocation of information in the Theme-Rheme framework is essential for effective cohesive writing. Failure to produce the Theme-Rheme distribution of information can result in unclear and confusing texts that cause difficulties for readers to follow the progression of ideas and/or arguments (Wang, 2007).

Soleymanzadeh and Gholami (2014), Wei (2016) and Yang (2015) clearly state that too much emphasis is placed on errors below sentence level such as spelling, vocabulary or subject-verb agreement while coherent discourse organization, including TR, has been largely neglected. For example, Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2014) note that the majority of IELTS examiners tend to focus on the former, while only about 30% of them pay attention to logical progression when marking. Such insufficient focus on TR is considered as a contributing factor to problems related to text organization, particularly the "loosely related events or facts, lack of a focus or central idea" (Wei, 2016, p. 1)

Method

2.1. Scope of the study

The corpus in this study consists of 30 IELTS Writing Task 2 Samples taken from a class of third-year students majoring in English. The scope of this study is limited to Argumentative essays.

2.2. Research questions

1. What is the realization of the misuse of TR patterns in students' essays?
2. What are the potential impacts of such misuse on the texts?

2.3. Research methods

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are employed. First, the percentage of different types of themes was calculated using quantitative method. Subsequently, a more in-depth textual analysis was conducted to find out the effects of different TR patterns on essay coherence.

2.4. Analytical framework

- Halliday's model of themes (2004)
- The analysis unit in this study is "T-unit"

2.5. Data analysis procedure

Phase 1: Identification and categorization of themes and thematic problems

1) In each essay, "T-units" were identified.
2) Within each T-unit, the boundary between theme and rheme was drawn in accordance with Halliday's (2004) model of thematicity.
3) The total numbers of all themes and each type were counted.
4) These numbers were also converted into percentage terms.
5) The statistics were subsequently presented in the form of chart.
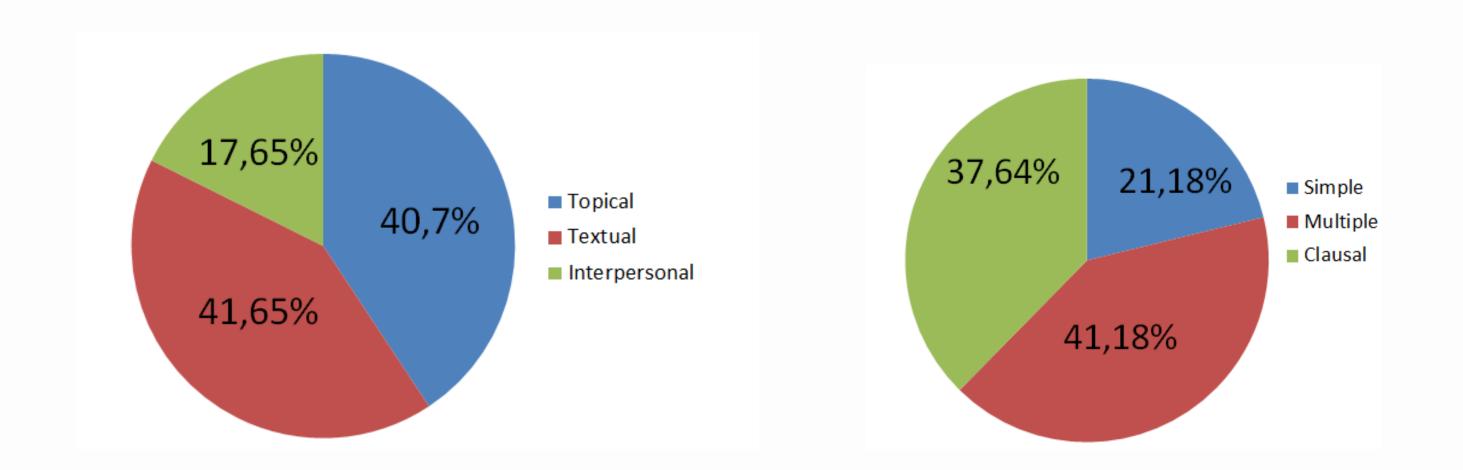6) The TR problems were identified based on Bloor & Bloor's (1992) and Belmonte and McCabe Hidalgo's (1998)'s theory

Phase 2: Effects of TR patterns on writing coherence

7) Based on categorization of problems concerning the employment of TR in previous stages, interpretation of the effects of TR on the coherence of texts was attempted along with the analysis of examples from the corpus.

Findings & Discussion

3.1. Answer to research question 1

Theme choices on students' IELT writing Task 2

Problems related to the selection TR patterns

Overuse of constant themes

Obesity should be seriously considered by the government and society because it adverse effects on people. Firstly, **being obese** increase the risk of numerous health problems, including heart disease, type 2 diabetes, and certain types of cancer. Secondly, **it** influences psychological health. **Obesity** boosts the likeliness to be social stigma, discrimination, and negative stereotyping, which can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and depression.

The empty rheme

Nowadays, unemployment **is a serious problem among societies**.
English now is regarded as a lingua France. Therefore, acquisition of English **is really important to students**

Overuse of There

Several factors may have caused this problem, but **there** are solutions to this.
There are a number of possible causes related to this issue.
There are people who think that taking a rest is the best for them.
However**, there** are various steps that elder people could take to tackle this problem.

Double rheme

A major reason for this could be old people suffer from lack of physical activities every day. They don't go exercise frequently **and don't eat enough healthy food.**

Brand new theme

To begin with, this phenomenon has posed severe problems to the society. **One significant cause** is the rapid population growth in many countries, particularly in developing nations.

Theme with unclear reference

On the other hand, despite these disadvantages, private care offers several notable advantages. Firstly, **it** is believed that private healthcare facilities often have access to modern and advanced equipment and technology. This enables them to provide cutting-edge medical procedures, diagnostic, and treatment that may not be readily available in public hospitals. Secondly, private healthcare can offer **them** shorter waiting times and increased convenience.

Confusing selection of textual themes

Secondly, beyond the physical impacts, there are also significant psychosocial effects. **Therefore,** overweight and obese individuals may face social stigma, discrimination, and negative stereotyping, which can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and depression.   (Text 9)

The results of this study are consistent with several other studies concerning the problems TR structures (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020; Pavavijarn, 2022; Luu & Nguyen, 2023)

3.2. Answer to research question 2

Breaking cohesive ties

Secondly, beyond the physical impacts, there are also significant psychosocial effects. Therefore, overweight and obese individuals may face social stigma, discrimination, and negative stereotyping, which can lead to feelings of shame, low self-esteem, and depression.

Rheme "*are also significant psychological effects*" concern the negative influence of obesity on people with it. In order to create cohesive text development, this rheme is supposed to be followed by a theme-rheme that elaborates on such conditions people obese suffers. However, the misuse of theme "Therefore" causes the illogical arrangement of information between the two sentences, contributing to a loose and incoherent text flow, at the same time creating a sense of confusion for readers.

Impeding textual unity

Prison is commonly regarded as an institution which serves as a kind of punishment for wrongdoers. There are people against the current operation of prison because they argue that only the full weight of the law will act as a deterrent, even though it is not always working.

As can be seen from the fragment, there is no link between either the theme "Prison" or the rheme "is commonly regarded as an institution which serves as a kind of punishment for wrongdoers" and the theme "There". Such dearth of thematically related connection may give the readers a feeling of incoherence.

Introducing irrelevant information

Exams are often believed to be the result of cramming. They are normally the tests of memory and performance under stress rather than true ability. Techers focus much on teaching students how to take exams. The intense pressure and anxiety associated with these exams have led to a rise in suicidal thoughts and students dropping out.

The theme of the third unit "*Teachers*" is relatively new, and it is irrelevant to the information presented in the previous discourse. Because of this, readers would find the text difficult to follow, and the communication purpose can be broken down at the sentence level (Wang, 2007)

Conclusion

The findings of this study may be of some assistance for pedagogical and research purposes. Specifically, teachers can draw on these findings to integrate this aspect into writing lessons and in comment sessions in order to raise students' awareness about this linguistic tool. Despite its limited generalizability, this study can contribute to the field of Functional Grammar and its results may provide some useful background and starting point for linguists and researchers to delve further into this topic.