



Analysis of the Thematic Structure and Thematic Progression Patterns of the Queen's 2020 National Speech

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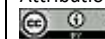
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Abstract

Under the guidance of the theory of theme and rheme as well as thematic progression patterns, two significant components in Systemic Functional Linguistics, this paper discusses the thematic structure and thematic progression patterns of the Queen's national speech "We will meet again!" which was delivered on April 5, 2020, when both England and the rest of the world were in the throes of the growing pandemic. With the use of quantitative and qualitative research methods, their distributions and the reasons are explored to figure out the thematic features, the effects, or the functions that have been achieved in Queen's speech.

Keywords: Public speech; Textual analysis; Thematic structure; Thematic progression.

1. Introduction

As one of the essential elements in Systemic Functional Grammar, the concept of theme and rheme was proposed by Mathesius, a representative of Prague School. Subsequently, Halliday (2000) recognized Mathesius findings and pointed out according to the markedness, theme can be divided into marked and unmarked ones. The thematic progression was put forward by Czech linguist Danes and Chinese scholars began to conduct relevant studies in 1980s.

Although over the past three decades theme and rheme theories and thematic progression patterns have been widely utilized to analyze disparate types of discourse like translation, news report, academic writing, etc (Hu, 2013; Liu, 2016; Zhu, 2016). Nevertheless, relatively fewer studies were designed to probe into the thematic structure and thematic progression patterns in speech discourse (Jiang and Liu, 2009; Li and Cui, 2018). Moreover, a small body of relevant studies mainly focus on political speeches, whereas other types of speeches were given a little consideration.

Therefore, based on the theory of thematic structure and thematic progression patterns, the present study attempts to analyze the Queen's 2020 national speech, which was delivered by Queen Elizabeth II on April 5, 2020 when the COVID-19 caused British people a rather great deal of anxiety with a total number of 47,806 confirmed cases. It aims to figure out the thematic features, the effects or the functions that have achieved in Queen's speech so as to help people better grasp the textual features of speech, and in the meantime prove the practicability of thematic structure and thematic progression patterns in discourse of national speech.

This paper falls into four parts. It first expounds on theoretical underpinnings including thematic structure and thematic progression. Then it introduces the methodological issues, in which the source of literature and procedures of data collection are included. Major findings and discussion are then presented from the above two perspectives, and a summary of its main idea is drawn at the end of this paper.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Thematic Structure

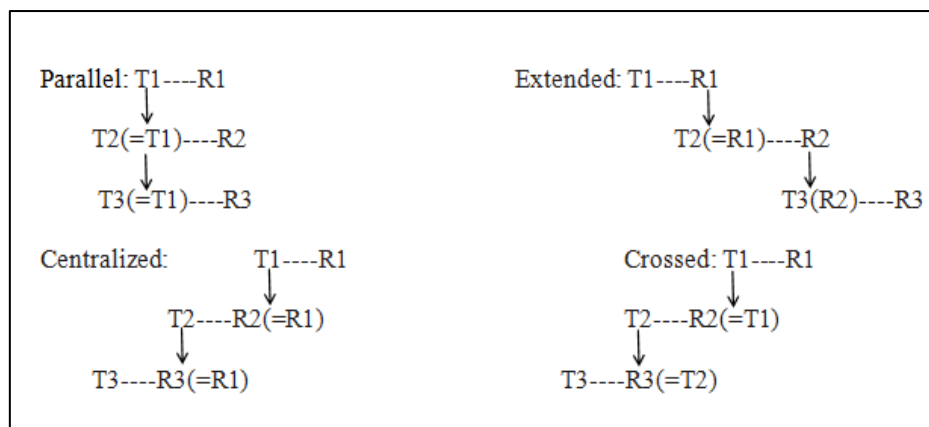
The structure that carries the line of meaning is defined as the thematic structure, which is an essential concept in textual function, one of the three meta-functions. It was first put forward by Mathesius who divided sentences into three parts: Theme, Narrative, and Transition (Han, 2010). Based on this view, Halliday (2000), revised and expanded the thematic structure in his framework of systemic functional linguistics, and pointed out that any sentence or utterance can be divided into two semantic components from the perspective of communicative function, namely theme and rheme. It is a general agreement that theme, the first element in the clause, refers to the given information; While rheme points to the rest of the clause and the new information, referring to the presentation that moves after the point of departure of the message (Halliday and Hasan, 1990).

More importantly, theme shares the feature of markedness and unmarkedness according to grammatical view (Halliday, 2000). Thus, it can be divided into marked theme and unmarked theme, and the difference between the two is their relation with subject. When the theme is equal to the position of the subject, it is then called unmarked theme, the most frequent sort of theme in discourse. And when the subject does not serve as a theme, it is referred to as marked theme, which is more prominent and can contain such circumstantial elements as places and times.

2.2. Thematic Progression Pattern

Each sentence has its own thematic structure. When a sentence exists alone, its theme and rheme are definite, yet when the sentences constitute a text, there will be some connection and change between the theme and the rheme. This connection and change are called progression, and the basic pattern of theme change summarized from the seemingly disorder sentences is the thematic progression pattern (Zhu and Yan, 2005).

In terms of thematic progression patterns, linguists have put forward disparate ways of classification. For instance, Danes proposed five types of thematic progression pattern in continuous discourse Huang (1988); Huang (1985), put forward seven models of thematic progression in English discourse on the basis of previous studies; and Zhu (1995), raised four kinds of progression patterns with an integration of different ideas. This paper will adopt the classification summarized by Zhu (1995) in that it represents quite a basic model with luminous and concise nature. The four major patterns of thematic progression are parallel, extended, centralized, and crossed patterns



3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The corpus of this study was the Queen's 2020 national speech taken from the magazine *English World*. Founded in 1981, *English World* is hosted by The Commercial Press and won the title of "the influential journal of New China for 60 years" in 2009. Furthermore, with certain popularity, it is known for its accuracy and timeliness. Therefore, it was selected as the source of data collection.

In selecting the Queen's speech, this study took typicality and timeliness into consideration. On the one hand, as a form of public speech, national speech presents certain nature with appeal, persuasion as well as agitation, and for British people, Queen Elizabeth II is undoubtedly regarded as a symbol of this whole nation. Therefore, her speech is quite typical and of good value. On the other hand, this speech was timely for it was addressed on April 5th, 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic showed a rampant tendency in England with a total number of nearly 50,000 confirmed cases.

3.2. Procedures of Analysis

The research data analysis procedures are summarized as follows. First, the material was collected from the Internet. Then, a relevant theory was employed to analyze the material. Actually, this national speech will be analyzed by two layouts: thematic structure and thematic progression patterns.

When analyzing the thematic structure, this study identified the theme of the clauses with the purpose of distinguishing which of them belong to marked themes and which are unmarked themes, and found out the functions for this manipulation. When analyzing the thematic progression patterns, the speech's thematic progression patterns were first marked, and then their different frequencies were calculated and analyzed.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Thematic Structure

As was mentioned above, the theme can be divided into marked theme and unmarked theme from grammatical view according to Halliday (2000). In this part, the markedness of the themes in the Queen's national speech was analyzed. The thematic structure of each clause was explored, and complex one was analyzed as a whole in thematic structure analysis. Totally, of the more than 500 words in the speech, there are twenty-nine clauses, as is shown in the Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 at the end of this paper. The Table 1 below depicts the number and percentage of marked theme and unmarked theme:

Table-1. Distribution of Unmarked and Marked Themes

Themes	Unmarked Theme	Marked Theme
Number	22	7
Percentage	75.9%	24.1%

As can be seen in this table, of the total twenty-nine clauses, there are twenty-two unmarked themes and seven marked themes, accounting for nearly 76% and 24% respectively. It is suggested, in this speech, that unmarked themes occupy the majority of the text. In terms of public speeches, it is reasonable for speakers to utilize unmarked theme more frequently for it is easier for listener to follow and grasp the main idea, and it is the reason why unmarked theme takes up the most part of this national speech.

4.1.1. Unmarked Themes

While unmarked theme conspicuously dominates this speech discourse, it can actually be presented in a way of pronoun, nominal, nominal group and so on [Chen et al. \(2004\)](#). Specific statistics are presented in the following table:

Table-2. Distribution of Unmarked Themes

Unmarked Themes	Pronoun	Nominal	Nominal Group
Number	16	4	2
Percentage	72.7%	18.2%	9.1%

It can be seen that compared with other constituents of unmarked themes, the pronoun appears the most frequently (72.7%), and the nominal and nominal group account for 18.2% and 9.1% respectively. The reason why pronouns are the most widely used in this speech is that pronouns are mostly simple for listeners to catch, yet nominal group like “every hour of your hard work” and “the attributes of self-discipline, of quiet good-humored resolve and of fellow-feeling” in this speech is less used compared with pronoun and nominal since it is more difficult to understand, and more efforts are needed to be paid.

Moreover, most of pronouns used are first person pronouns. Specifically, among the sixteen pronouns, the first pronoun including *I* and *we* repeatedly appear thirteen times, taking up more than half of the total unmarked themes. It is shown in the [Table 3](#) below:

Table-3. Distribution of Pronouns in Unmarked Themes

Pronouns	I	We	It	Those
Number	6	7	2	1
Percentage	37.5%	43.8%	12.5%	6.2%

Singular first person pronoun *I* refers to Queen herself and she used *I* as a subject 6 times in the speech, strongly expressing her firm position, attitude and authority as a Queen of Britain. In the meantime, it also demonstrates her willingness to take the responsibility of uniting the British people to fight against the pandemic. For example:

- (1) “I am speaking to you at what I know is an increasingly challenging time”.
- (2) “I am sure the nation will join me in assuring you that what you do is appreciated”.

Although first person pronoun in plural form *we* is slightly complicated with several meanings, in this speech, six of them refer to both the Queen and the British people. Only one time of *we* referring to Queen and her sister appears when the Queen recalled her first broadcast in childhood. Therefore, in general, the use of a large number of *we* indicates that the speaker wants to maintain an equal and trustworthy relationship with the audience, and at the same time, it renders the audience feel that they are standing abreast and carrying a common mission together with the Queen. For example:

- (3) “Together we are tackling this disease”.
- (4) “We should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure, better days will return”:

Other pronouns like *it* and *those* are directly or indirectly concerned with the British people, trying to confirm the efforts that they have made and encourage them to confront with the COVID-19 epidemic more bravely.

4.1.2. Marked Themes

The marked themes account less than one third of the total 29 themes in the speech, but it does not mean we can ignore the essential role of them. In previous studies, some scholars have discussed the functions of marked theme, such as textual coherence, connection between the preceding and the following and so on ([Wang, 2003](#); [Zhang, 2010](#); [Zhao, 2013](#)). [Liu and Li \(2010\)](#), hold that, according to the characteristics of the text, the marked theme can be divided into two categories: time marked theme and person marked theme. However, due to the particularity of this text, it is more appropriate to divide marked themes into three types, namely time marked theme, person marked theme and environment marked theme. And since there’s no person marked one in this speech, the following [Table 4](#) only shows the marked themes of time concerned and of environment related.

Table-4. Distribution of Marked Themes

Marked Themes	Time Concerned	Environment Concerned
Number	6	1
Percentage	85.7%	14.3%

As is shown in the table above, for the seven marked themes, six of them are time related, taking up nearly 86%. Furthermore, among the six marked themes of time concerned, four are such typical ones as “But for now”, “This time”, “But now”, and “Today”. However, as the other two including “though self-isolating may at times be hard” and “While we have faced challenges before” are time related as well, we group them into time marked themes. Unlike the unmarked themes, the marked themes provide the time background, which make the speech clearer and more coherent on the one hand. And the speaker mentions the past and the present consecutively so as to emphasize that she has much confidence towards the fight against the epidemic in that British people have overcome so many difficulties together. Thus, on the other, it is easier to get the audience in the mood by using time marked themes. For example, she says:

(5) “Today, once again, many will feel a painful sense of separation from their loved ones”.

(6) “But now, as then, we know, deep down, that it is the right thing to do”.

However, when the Queen encourages and reassures her people, she also warns them of the seriousness of this pandemic and urges them to take it seriously, as the following sentence describes:

(7) “While we have faced challenges before, this one is different”.

When it comes to the mere one marked theme of environment concerned, namely “Across the Commonwealth and around the world”, the speaker attempts to highlight that not only England but also the rest of the world are making endeavors to help each other through different ways. It can also be seen as a way of encouraging the audience that they are not fighting alone, but collectively.

4.2. Thematic Progression Patterns

Thematic progression is considered as a kind of text coherence method. As is mentioned above, this paper adopts the classification by [Zhu \(1995\)](#), and therefore, there are four major types of thematic progression pattern: constant theme pattern, linear theme pattern, constant rheme pattern, and cross rheme pattern. The thematic progression patterns of this speech are analyzed so as to figure out how the thematic structures in this text move forward. Based on the segmentation of the thematic structure of each clause, the thematic progression of the whole text follows the patterns below:

T1--R1
T2(=T1)--R2
T3(=T1)--R3
T4(=R3)--R4
T5(=T1)--R5
T6(=R4)--R6
T7(=T1)--R7
T8(=T1)--R8
T9(=R8)--R9
T10--R10
T11--R11(R10)
T12--R12(R10)
T13--R13
T14(R13)--R14
T15--R15
T16--R16
T17(=R16)--R17
T18(R17)--R18
T19--R19(R18)
T20--R20(R18)
T21--R21(=R6)
T22--R22(R13)
T23(T6)--R23
T24(R23)--R24
T25(T23)--R25
T26(T23)--R26
T27(T23)--R27
T28(T23)--R28
T29--R29(R2+R5)

As the patterns show, three of the four major thematic progression patterns are actually used in Queen’s 2020 national speech with differing occurrences, and more details are shown in [Table 5](#) below:

Table-5. Distribution of Thematic Progression Patterns

Patterns	Parallel	Extended	Centralized	Crossed	Others
Number	10	7	7	0	4
Percentage	36%	25%	25%	0%	14%

From observation, we can see that the parallel patterns normally occur in this speech, accounting for 36%. The extended pattern and the centralized pattern are tied for the second, each taking up 25%. However, the crossed pattern is not utilized in this speech partly for it is so complicated that it does not fit in public speech. In fact, the similar findings are also drawn in previous studies (Jiang, 2017; Li and Cui, 2018). Finally, in the speech, Queen is found to shift the topics at times, which therefore makes 14% happening of unclear or no thematic progression.

Specifically, the speaker uses a large number of parallel patterns, in which all clauses in this pattern start with the same theme, and each of the following rheme illustrates the mere theme in an effort to promote the development of new information. For instance,

(8) I (T1) // am speaking to you at what I know is an increasingly challenging time.....(R1) I (T2=T1) // want to thank everyone on the NHS front line, as well as care workers.....(R2)

(9) We (T1) // should take comfort that while we may have more still to endure.....(R1) We (T2=T1) will be with our friends again; (R2) we (T3=T1) // will be with our families again; (R3) we (T4=T1) // will meet again. (R4)

In example (8), Queen used *I* repeatedly in the beginning part of the speech not only to succeed in drawing the audiences' attention and making the speech simpler, but also to show her authority as a leader of the country. In the ninth example, she used the pronoun *we* four times of *we* in a row, showing that she always stand in the same line with the people. More importantly, by using the same theme *we* to connect different rheme, the speaker resonates with the audiences in an easy manner and clearly presents her strong desire and firm attitudes towards the victory.

As for extended pattern and centralized pattern, they are frequently used in this speech as well. In order to avoid monotony of the form, and to enhance the coherence, the former is used in which the rheme or part of it in the first sentence becomes the theme of the second sentence. For the latter, it means two clauses share the same rheme. For example:

(10) I (T1) // am sure the nation will join me in assuring you that what you do is appreciated, (R1) and every hour of your hard work (T2=R1) // brings us closer to a return to more normal times. (R2)

(11) We, as children, (T1) // spoke from here at Windsor to children who had been evacuated from their homes and sent away for their own safety. (R1) Today, once again, (T2) // many will feel a painful sense of separation from their loved ones. (R2=R1) But now, as then, (T3) // we know, deep down, that it is the right thing to do (R3=R1).

In example (10), although the R1 and T2 are seemingly different in form, what they mean is fundamentally approximate, that is, to tell the audience that their hard work is truly appreciated and commendable. Therefore, it can be concluded that the thematic progression pattern between the two sentences is the extended one, which make Queen's speech more precise, terse and well-knit. Similarly, in the final example, the R1, R2 and R3 are differing at the first glance, but with a closer look, we may find that all of them have to do with separation or self-isolation. By using the same rheme to link the sentences, Queen highlights the important role of separation and attempts to appeal everyone to take it seriously and actively.

To sum up, of the four major thematic progression patterns, parallel, extended and centralized ones are used frequently in Queen's speech. furthermore, it is found that Queen chose a certain pattern in an attempt to guide the audience and achieve her speech purposes.

5. Conclusion

It is shown that the use of both certain themes and thematic patterns is determined by the purposes that Queen aims to achieve. With regard to thematic structure, it is found that unmarked themes occupy a dominant role in Queen's national speech, among which pronouns including *I* and *we* are most frequently utilized, succeeding in showing her firm attitude and authority as well as willingness to take the responsibility, and in shortening the distance between her and the audience. While for the minority of marked themes, almost all of them are time related, which help the Queen to present the speech in a more coherent and clearer manner. When it comes to the thematic progression patterns, of the four major thematic progression patterns, three of which appear in this speech. Parallel type holds the largest proportion which is followed by extended and centralized types.

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