

## An Analysis of Theme and Thematic Progression Patterns in Political Speeches

Tan Feifei

Nanchang Institute of Science & Technology, Nanchang, Jiangxi, China

Email:215963176@qq.com

**Keywords:** simple theme; multiple themes; thematic progression; political speeches

**Abstract:** Theme and Thematic Progression are important devices in text analysis. For a long period of time, many researchers have applied the thematic progression to analyze journalistic texts, advertising texts, and academic papers and so on. However, few researchers have analyzed political texts from the perspective of theme and thematic progression. We all know that as a special kind of text, political speeches require well—organized structures and impressive language to effectively express the speakers' viewpoint and appeal the audiences. Therefore, the analysis of Theme and Thematic Progression of political speeches can not only facilitate effective textual organizing for the speaker to achieve communication but also help the audience understand the speakers' thoughts and intentions. Based on the framework of Halliday's thematic theory and Danes's Thematic Progression patterns, the author select President Obama's Election Success Speech as a case, and adopts quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze the Themes and Thematic Progression patterns in it.

### 1. Literature Review

According to M.A.K. Halliday, an English clause typically has two peaks of prominence—one at the beginning (which he calls theme) and one at the end (which he calls rheme).

He also said that the theme is typically a single element in the clause structure. Very frequently, however, the Theme has the form of a nominalization, a device which allows two or more elements to be taken together as a Theme. (Halliday, 2007:30) That is about simple theme and multiple theme.

As for the marked theme and unmarked theme, Eggins said that unmarked Theme is when Theme conflates with the Mood structure constituent that typically occurs in the first position in clauses of that Mood class. (Eggins, 2004:318)

Theme is a resource for organizing the interpersonal and ideational meanings of each clause in the form of a message. (Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, 2009:65)

Geoff Thompson is a great linguist who has made great achievements in linguistics. His famous book named *Introducing Functional Grammar* introduced some linguistic knowledge from the aspect of the function of language. In this book in chapter 6, he introduced organizing the message: the textual meta—function: Theme. He holds that the Theme is the first constituent of the clause and all the rest is simply labeled the Rheme. Thompson carefully illustrated theme from many aspects. He talked about marked theme and unmarked theme. He identified theme in declarative clauses and non—declarative clauses. Then he came to the part of thematising structure.

In China, many linguists have made many researches on theme and thematic progression. And they made great achievements after many researches.

I read a book named *The Outline of Systematic Functional Grammar*. The book was written by Hu Zhuanglin, Zhu Yongsheng, Zhang Delu and Li Zhanzi. They are all great person in the study of linguistics. In this book, they mainly focused on SFG. In chapter 6, it introduced about the textual meta—function. Firstly, it classified theme into simple theme, multiple theme and clausal theme and then introduced the three kinds of themes one by one. And then it analyzed thematic structure and mood structure. Then it came to the familiar marked theme and unmarked theme. Besides, this book illustrated the relationship between thematic progression and information flow. After that, it

introduced information structure and thematic structure.

And in the book *Theory and Practice of Discourse Analysis* by Huang Guowen, he introduced how to analyze a text from different angles.

## 2. Thematic Progression Theory

We all know that every sentence has its own Theme and Rheme. When a sentence exists alone and has no context, its Theme and Rheme are fixed and changing, at the same time without any development. However, most texts are constructed on the basis of more than two sentences which are internally related. Thus the Theme and Rheme in the following sentences will have some connection with the Theme and Rheme in the former sentences.

Thematic Progression was first proposed by Danes. He introduced the basic thematic progression patterns in his article “*on Linguistics Analysis of Text Structure*”. He put forward the concept of Thematic Progression: “The choice and ordering of utterance themes, their mutual concatenation and hierarchy, as well as their relationship to the hyper themes of superior text units (such as the paragraph, chapter, etc) to the whole text, and to the situation. Thematic Progression might be viewed as the skeleton of the plot.” (Danes, 1974:115) In his view, Thematic Progression is one of the important devices to realize textual cohesion and coherence, playing a significant role in the analysis of a text. Therefore, Thematic Progression has aroused many scholars’ interests, though there is still no consensus about its classification. Danes (1974) puts forward three Thematic Progression Patterns: 1. simple linear 2.constant (or continuous) 3.derived theme. Xu Shenghuan (1982) brings forth four patterns. Huang Guowen coins (1988) six patterns. Huang Yan (1985) bring forward seven patterns, and Zhu Yongsheng (1995) four. In this section, I will focus on Danes’ Patterns.

## 3. Thematic Analysis on President Obama’s Election Success Speech

In the following part, I will analyze his speech from the following three aspects. Through the different sentences and examples, we will understand the characteristics of speeches more clearly.

### 3.1. Analysis of Simple Theme

Simple theme refers to the theme of a clause which consists of only one structure element. It lies on the function it plays instead of the length. In Halliday’s view, “The Theme of a clause consists of just one structural element, and that element is represented by just one unit—one nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase” (Halliday, 2000:49). That is to say elements can be one word or more than one word, which are usually a nominal group, an adverbial group or a prepositional group.

Although some elements in simple theme contain more than one group or phrase, they still attributed to simple themes, because these elements only function as a single constituent. Halliday claims “two or more” separate elements are grouped together so that they form a single constituent of the Theme+Rheme structure.” (Halliday,1994:40). One point should be explained that the structural feature “what we say” is the “nominalization” according to Halliday.

(1) *We (T) // didn’t start with much money or many endorsements.*

(2) *This (T) // is my victory.*

(3) *The road (T) //ahead will be long.*

(4) *Our climb (T) //will be steep.*

(5) *This (T) // will be setbacks and false starts.*

(6) *It (T) // cannot happen without you.*

(7) *Our union (T) // can be perfected.*

(8) *We (T) // have seen so much.*

(9) *This (T) // is our chance to answer that call.*

(10) *This (T) // is our moment.*

Here we can see that in the examples above, the theme are nouns or pronouns. This kind of

simple sentences expressed clear ideas and opinions by simple theme. We can see that president Obama here stressed the themes to emphasize the sender of the action. That is to say we can do it altogether. By this way, Obama can gain more support from the ordinary people of the country. So this is the aim of political speeches or says the purposes of the speeches. Simple theme can express positive and clear opinions. So usually, political leaders will surely apply simple themes no matter how many multiple themes they use.

In this speech, the speaker used large amount of simple themes, taking up about 80% of the whole speech.

### 3.2. Analysis of Multiple Themes

Multiple theme is a kind of theme which is made up of multiple semantic constituents. Usually it has a constituent which indicates the conceptual meaning. Besides, it may contain constituent which shows the textual meaning or interpersonal meaning.

In Obama's speeches, he sometimes applies multiple themes to show the contextual coherence and special tones in his speech. In his speech, he applied multiple themes to show certain feelings in his heart and for the purpose of strengthening power and consistence of his speech. I think it is a good way to express certain emotion in political speeches.

There are 100 sentences in this speech and nearly ten sentences contain multiple themes, taking up about 10%. Besides, as for marked theme and unmarked theme, unmarked theme is used more often than marked theme, and unmarked theme covered about 60% of the whole speech.

In order to analyze this speech more clearly, we must make clear the background situation in which president Obama made this speech. We all know that president Obama is the first black president in American history. And I think it will be an encouragement and a progress for America and American people. It indicates that America will go through some changes. When the president Obama gave the speech, America was undergoing crisis and people are expecting some changes for a better future about the economy and politics and so on. In this kind of situation, Obama's speech was very significant and important for encouraging people in America. In the whole, Obama used many simple themes and unmarked themes to show his clear opinions and ideas. With this kind simple, clear and direct theme type, Obama showed his confidence for future development in his country. Thus the listeners can have the same confidence and encouragement, which is very important for America in that moment.

So how all these themes cooperate into a fluent thinking pattern in a short time? We should analyze the thematic progression in this speech next.

### 3.3. Analysis of Thematic Progression

As I have mentioned before, there are three kinds of thematic progressions according to Danes: simple linear thematic progression, thematic progression with constant/ continuous theme and thematic progression with derived themes. Next we can find some examples in this speech for the three kinds of thematic progressions.

Firstly, we can find simple linear thematic progression in this speech. There are some examples.

(1) And I know (T1)// you didn't do it for me. (R1) You (T2) // did it because you understand the enormity of the task that lies ahead. (R2)

(2) It (T1)// is only the chance for us to make that change. (R1) And that cannot happen (T2)// if we go back to the way things were. (R2)

(3) This election (T1)// had many firsts and many stories that will be hold for generations. (R1) But one that's on my mind tonight (T2)// is about a woman who cast her ballot in Atlanta.(R2) She (T3)// is a lot like the millions of others who stood in line to make their vote heard in this election except for one thing—Ann Nixon Cooper is 106 years old. (R3)

In these examples, the Rheme of the first sentence equals the theme of the following sentence, simply saying, T2 equals R1, T3 equals R2 and so on.

In the first example, Obama told the listeners a story that happened in the process of election. He pointed out that there were many unforgettable stories in this whole process and one among these is about the woman aged 106 years old. By using simple linear thematic progression, Obama made a

clear impression about the woman with fluent and coherent language, showing his clear logic. The other two examples both apply simple linear thematic progression to express clear and linear thinking patterns.

Secondly, we can find thematic progression with constant/ continuous theme. In this speech, this kind of thematic progression can be found very often. This kind of thematic progression pattern applies the same theme to strengthen power or stress some kind of special feelings. I think it is very common and effective way in political speech. Here are some examples.

(4) It's the answer (T1)// told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen; by people who waited three hours and four hours, many for the very first time in their lives, because they believed that this time must be different; that their voice could be that difference.(R1)

(5) Senator McCain (T1)// fought long and hard in this campaign, (R1) and he's (T1) //fought even longer and harder for the country he loves. (R2) He (T1) // has endured sacrifices for America that most of us cannot begin to imagine. (R3)

(6) But I (T1) //will always be honest with you about the challenges we face. (R1)I (T1) //will listen to you, especially when we disagree. (R2) And above all, I (T1) //will ask you join in the work of remaking this nation the only way it's been done in America for 221 years—block by block, brick by brick, calloused hand by calloused hand. (R3)

In all these examples, the speaker used the same theme to emphasize the subject in the sentences to show certain feelings. For example, in the fifth example, the theme is Senator McCain. He was the rival of Obama in the election. And at last, Obama was elected as the president of America. In his speech, Obama showed his gratitude towards Senator McCain by repeating the same theme. Obama appreciated the efforts that Senator McCain has made in the election. Although he was failed in this election, his best wishes for the country are appraised. Through this example, we can see that Obama showed his respect for his rival.

In the sixth example, Obama repeated the pronoun "I", which showed his ambition for building this country into a better one.

In the seventh example, Obama showed his gratitude for those who made great efforts in the whole process, from official person to common people in America. By this way, he can gain more support from the ordinary people and had a good beginning in the future's work.

All these examples are powerful to show the opinions and determinations of president Obama. From all these words, we can see the better future that Obama described. And American people are more hopeful and determined for building a better world.

Thirdly, we can hardly find sentences of thematic progression with derived themes in this speech. So we can see that political speeches usually apply this kind of thematic progression.

#### **4. Conclusion**

This thesis points out the significant meaning of political speeches. It also attempts to take Halliday's and Thompson's theories and Danes' thematic progression theory as the theoretical framework to guide the research on the election success speech given by the American President Obama.

This thesis makes a concrete study on the speech by Obama from the respective of theme and thematic progression. After making this kind of analysis, we may have a more clear impression about the characteristics of political speeches and their organization, which is very helpful for our understanding and writing in the future.

I think this study is very significant and meaningful for us to understand the function of language and charm of language.

However, of course, this study contains many limitations. Because of limited time, I just apply one speech as the example and I know this is not enough. And it can't reveal the general common characteristics of speeches. In the future, more work should be done on this kind of research.

## References

- [1] Halliday, M.A.K. *Linguistic Study of Text and Discourse* [M]. Beijing: Peking University Press, 2007.
- [2] Matthiessen, M.I.M. Christian. *Systemic Functional Grammar: A First Step into the Theory* [M]. Beijing: Higher Education Press, 2009.
- [3] Thompson Geoff, *Introducing Functional Grammar* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [4] Huang guowen. *The theory and practice of discourse analysis* [M]. Beijing: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2001.
- [5] Hu zhuanglin. *On functionalism* [M]. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2000.
- [6] Hu zhuanglin, Zhu yongsheng, Zhang delu, Li zhanzi. *Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, 2005.