



The Equivalence of Thematic Structure in English-Arabic Translation

Ashraf S. H. Oqab & Ayman. E. M. Geedallah

Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Tobruk University

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the translation of thematic structure in literary texts, highlighting differences in hierarchical organization at different thematic levels. This study adopts Halliday's functional model of theme-rheme and its application to translation from English to Arabic. It reveals that the most frequent type of theme and thematic progression is the experiential theme. The study concludes that finding equivalence in translation is very difficult; consequently, translators struggle to keep up with change and find effective equivalence during their work. Therefore, this study recognizes the difficulty of such equivalence and seeks to discover how to assist translators and learners.

التكافؤ البنيوي الموضوعي في الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية

أشرف صالح حامد و أيمن احميدة محمود

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية، كلية الآداب، جامعة طبرق، ليبيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية

البنية الموضوعية
الموضوع والمسند
التكافؤ الترجيحي
الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية
النحو الوظيفي النظامي

الملخص

تتناول هذه الدراسة ترجمة البنية الموضوعية في النصوص الأدبية، مسلطة الضوء على الاختلافات في التنظيم الهرمي على المستويات الموضوعية المختلفة. وتعتمد هذه الدراسة النموذج الوظيفي لهاليداي في الموضوع والمسند (الثيم والرهم) وتطبيقه على الترجمة من الإنجليزية إلى العربية. وتكشف الدراسة أن النوع الأكثر شيوعاً من الموضوع والتتابع الموضوعي هو الموضوع التجريحي. وتخلص الدراسة إلى أن تحقيق التكافؤ في الترجمة أمر بالغ الصعوبة؛ ونتيجة لذلك، يواجه المترجمون صعوبة في مواكبة التغيرات وإيجاد تكافؤ فعال أثناء عملهم. ومن ثم، تدرك هذه الدراسة صعوبة هذا التكافؤ وتسعى إلى اكتشاف كيفية مساعدة المترجمين والمتعلمين.

1.1 Introduction

A sentence is viewed as a unit that holds a message. The structure of a sentence is divided into two parts: theme and rheme. The theme is the starting point of a message, and the rheme is how this message is developed and brought to completion (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). The idea of the theme-rheme structure was developed by the Prague School linguists at the beginning of the last century (Firbas, 1992) and later refined by Halliday (1985), who modified it along a slightly different line. Key differences exist between the Prague and British schools regarding theme-rheme organization (Baker, 2018).

Each language has a unique linguistic structure that distinguishes it from others, be it lexical, syntactic, structural, or governed by specific writing rules and agreement. In translation, it is therefore crucial to produce a text that adheres to target text (TT) conventions to avoid interference. Equivalence is a fundamental concept in the translation process in general and in linguistic theories in particular (Catford, 1965; Nida, 1964). Ideally, equivalence is a bilingual synonymy or homology based on lexical equivalences and cultural overlaps (Nida, 1964).

The problem with formal equivalence is that it can require a great effort from readers (Nida & Taber, 1969). Conversely, the problem with dynamic (or functional) equivalence is that the reader

encounters the text with most interpretive decisions already made and must assume that the translator's work is unbiased (Venuti, 1995).

All languages are different to an extent, but they also share similarities. To understand the differences and similarities between Arabic and English in terms of thematic structure, this study sheds light on the literary norms and rules in both languages and analyzes common mistakes made by learners, which are often wrong responses to the stimulus of their first language (L1) (Shormani, 2013).

A significant issue in translation is the pervasive syntactic asymmetries between Arabic and English. Many translators shift Arabic word order to English word order to establish grammatical equivalence with little consideration for the syntactic typological differences between the languages as source and target (Alshehri, 2017).

This study aims to determine the mismatch in grammatical functions and syntactic typology between the target language (TL) and source text (ST). Word order, tense shift, case asymmetry, ellipsis, passive structures, and selectional restrictions are some grammatical issues that illustrate these syntactic asymmetries. The findings suggest that

*Corresponding author:

E-mail addresses: boafgair@tu.edu.ly, (A. E. M. Geedallah) ayman.geedallah@tu.edu.ly

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the English translation needs to be structured according to principles demonstrated by the Arabic structure before the task is carried out.

1.2 Understanding Thematic Structure

A thematic structure is an overarching concept or proposition that runs throughout a text, usually organized around a central topic. It strategically ties together more specific concepts or statements based on particular social forms of knowledge, perception, and belief. A thematic structure helps make a text coherent, orienting it around a central theme or a strand of related themes.

Thematic structure is a concept in linguistics. When people talk, their utterances serve purposes in three separable parts: the speech act, the propositional content, and the thematic structure. Because speaking is cooperative, speakers must pay attention to their listeners' knowledge, state of mind, and level of understanding for the conversation to be effective. Speakers make assumptions about what listeners know.

According to Halliday (1985), the speakers' judgments about the listeners' current mental states are reflected in the thematic structure used.

1.3 Thematic Focus in Literature

The term 'thematic focus' refers to the central message of a literary work. It answers the questions: What is the author's focus in telling this story? What does the author hope the reader gains? Recognizing theme as a universal issue, thematic focus is the specific message upon which the author concentrates the reader's attention.

Theme is usually defined as the underlying message imparted through a work of literature. Many readers try to reduce the theme to an abstraction, such as "love." However, the theme is deeper; it is the message about the abstraction that the work conveys (e.g., "love is worth fighting for"). Authors sometimes state their themes explicitly, but most often, the reader must use critical reading skills to uncover them.

1.4 Thematic Approach and Translation

A thematic approach to teaching and learning connects many areas of the curriculum within a unified theme. This approach is a powerful tool for integrating the curriculum, making learning more natural and less fragmented than traditional, subject-divided school days.

Translation is a process of rendering meaning, ideas, or messages from a source text (ST) into a target language (TL). The accuracy, clarity, and naturalness of the rendered meaning are paramount. Thus, it is crucial to consider whether target text readers receive equivalent information to source text readers. Catford (1965) defines translation as the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another (TL). Nida and Taber (1982) propose that translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalence of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. Translation, therefore, is not merely changing languages but finding the closest equivalent in meaning and style.

The requirement of the normal sequence theme-rheme is more easily met in Arabic, which has relatively free word order, than in English. Thus, if the object of an active clause becomes a theme, Arabic strategy is to keep the active voice and resume the thematized object with a pronoun. English, however, normally uses the passive voice to reconcile the requirements of functional sentence perspective and grammatical word-order.

A central challenge in Arabic-to-English translation involves preserving the thematic structure—the arrangement of known (theme) and new (rhematic) information. This is most difficult when the original Arabic word order cannot be directly replicated in English.

While both languages generally place thematic elements at the beginning of a sentence and rhematic elements at the end, their grammatical rules often differ. For instance, the Arabic example

sentence "[وَبِنَى هَذَا الْجِسْرَ مِهْنَدَسُونَ مِصْرِيُونَ]" is active, while its natural English equivalent, "This bridge was built by Egyptian engineers," is passive. Despite this grammatical shift, the core order of ideas remains consistent: "bridge" comes first, followed by "Egyptian engineers".

The key difference is the verb placement; Arabic allows the verb to precede the subject, whereas English declarative sentences almost always require the verb to follow the subject. Consequently, translators often cannot alter English word order solely for thematic purposes, as it is constrained by the language's fundamental grammatical rules

1.5 Thematic Organization: Arabic vs. English

Analysis based on the Prague School's theory of Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP) relates the passive voice to problems of theme. A key difference exists between English and Arabic discourse strategies: English shows a great predilection for the true passive construction (including the agentive phrase, e.g., "Zaid was struck by Omar"), while Arabic demonstrates an obvious disinclination for its use, preferring an active construction with a resumptive pronoun (e.g., "Zaidun darabahu Omar" lit. Zaid struck him Omar = 'Zaid was struck by Omar') (Firbas, 1992).

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2.1 Methodology and Data Analysis

This study adopts a descriptive methodology to examine textual meanings and their equivalent translations, focusing on the various thematic choices in the Arabic Target Text (TT) compared to the English Source Text (ST). It analyzes changes in textual meanings—whether lost or added—during the translation process by investigating the different thematic choices made by translators. The examples are drawn from Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist*.

Example 1:

ST: "The tears rolled down his cheeks." (Dickens, 1838, p. 33)

TT: "لكن تدرجت الدموع علي عينيه" p. 32

Analysis: The Arabic equivalent thematizes the verbal element - "تدرجت" rolled. The theme carries given information (the tears), and the rheme provides new information (down his cheeks). The Arabic theme is more marked as it occurs in a non-canonical VSO word order.

Example 2:

ST: "Raising the candle above his head" (Dickens, 1838, p. 35)

TT: "وهو يرفع الشمعه فوق راسه" p. 34

Analysis: The English theme is a pro-formal subject (implied 'he'). The Arabic pattern thematizes the verbal element - "يرفع" raising. The grammatical subject is implied for the third person singular.

Example 3:

ST: "If you kept the boy on soup, ma'am, this would never have happened." (Dickens, 1838, p. 55)

TT: "او تبقيني الفتاء علي الحساء يا سيدتي، لم يكن هذا ليحدث" p. 54

Analysis: In both languages, either the subordinate or matrix clause can function as the theme of a complex sentence. The Arabic thematization in this example is more marked than the common English equivalent.

Example 4:

ST: "Whether he died in the attempt or not, he would make one effort to rush upstairs." (Dickens, 1838, p. 185)

TT: "ان مات اثناء المحاولة ام لا، سيبدل جهداً ليصعد السلم": p. 184

Analysis: In this sentence, the subordinate clause is thematized. In English, the theme in such constructions is nearly always realized by the initial subordinate clause. While the typical order in English is for the matrix clause to precede the subordinate clause, Arabic can thematize either the entire matrix or subordinate clause. It is also common in Arabic to place a part of the subordinate clause in the initial thematic position, with its original position occupied by a co-referring pronominal element.

Example 5:

ST: "Isn't he, Oliver?" (Dickens, 1838, p. 85)

TT: "اليس كذلك يا اوليفر؟": p. 84

Analysis: The theme consists of three parts: the interrogative element, the negative marker ("ليس") and the lexical elements. The first two elements realize the interpersonal part of the theme, while the last element constitutes the experiential part. The information conveyed by the theme may be given or new, depending on the context. The English equivalent of this type of theme can be found in cleft sentences or what is termed the "predicated theme".

Example 6:

ST: "When the night came he turned into a meadow." (Dickens, 1838, p. 63)

TT: "عندما خيم الليل توجه نحو المرج": p. 62

Analysis: Assigning the status of "given" to the theme helps connect the clause to prior discourse, which in turn promotes better comprehension of the message. The tendency to place given elements at the beginning and new elements at the end of a clause is known as the end-focus principle. This often works in conjunction with the end-weight principle, which states that heavier, more complex elements are usually placed toward the end of a clause.

Example 7:

ST: "If he made jokes with his superiors" (Dickens, 1838, p. 43)

TT: "ان هو قام بالمزاح مع من هم اعلي منه": p. 42

Analysis: In this Arabic example, the theme is the subject, and the rheme is the verb. Arabic allows for this switching of theme and rheme because its sentence element order is relatively free. This is less common in English, where the position of elements (e.g., Subject-Verb-Object) is more fixed. The corresponding English sentence must start with the subject: "If he made jokes with his superiors".

Example 8:

ST: "The boy for you, my dear." (Dickens, 1838, p. 163)

TT: "هو صبي لك ي عزيزي": p. 162

Analysis: The theme in the TT is unmarked; it carries given information, and the focus is placed on the element ("هو"). In contrast, the theme in the ST is marked and carries a contrastive information focus, with the element ("the boy") expressing given

information. In the English sentence, the marked arrangement is determined by the given-new information structure, where the focus on the theme highlights the new element. In the Arabic sentence, the distinction between unmarked and marked patterns is determined by the elements occupying the initial position (the subject in a marked theme) as well as by the given-new information distribution.

2.2 Conclusion

This study investigated the theme/rheme structure of English and Arabic literary texts from a translation perspective, revealing a high occurrence of experiential themes and a low frequency of interpersonal themes in both languages. It concludes that thematic structures may shift in translation, with Arabic conventions potentially evolving due to English influence, underscoring the importance for translators to conduct thematic analysis to preserve the target language's style. These findings highlight the profound challenge of literary translation, which is deeply embedded in cultural frameworks, requiring the translator to bridge significant linguistic and cultural gaps for the target reader. Therefore, it is recommended to enhance the field of cultural translation by supporting relevant research, fostering collaboration between specialists, and activating academic and training forums—such as seminars and professional courses—to emphasize cultural aspects, translator neutrality, and the development of robust translation criticism.

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