A Case Study of Commencement Speech from the Perspective of Thematic Progression Pattern*

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As a unique discourse genre, public speaking plays an important role in conveying the speaker’s position, gaining consensus of public opinion, even initiating a call and arousing the audience’s actions. Based on a commencement speech from the School of Medicine of Tsinghua university, this paper identifies four types of thematic progression pattern, their use and discourse features, the speech purpose and its gist, the distribution of different types of thematic progression pattern within the framework of the Theme-Rheme progression pattern of Systemic Functional Linguistics. By doing so, the speaker’s state position, alma mater position and her individual position are conveyed respectively and it is of significance to provide reference for the organization method of speech discourse during the special epidemic period.

Keywords: thematic progression pattern, commencement speech, discourse characteristics, discourse gist

1. Introduction

Systemic Functional Linguistics is a general linguistics as well as an applicable linguistics. It is precisely because of its comprehensive study of natural language that it extends from the internal study of language to the external study of language, and its application is also very extensive. In the practical application of language, it is problem-oriented and of great significance to the interdisciplinary stylistics research, translation research, language teaching and other fields (Huang & Xin, 2014). Discourse analysis, as an integral part of Systemic Functional Linguistics, is indispensable to the study of systemic-functional grammar. When a text is regarded as a finished product, the analysis of the specific value of the particular text, such as the specific meaning expressed in the text, belongs to the applicable linguistic category and is a typical embodiment of the applicability of Systemic Functional Linguistics. By selecting a commencement speech during the outbreak of COVID-19, this paper attempts to analyze the discourse features, speech purpose and its gist and explore the relationship between the Theme-Rheme progression pattern and the speech gist in this specific discourse genre in order to offer more example demonstrations to the applicability of the Systemic Functional Linguistics and at the meanwhile provide reference for the specific speech discourse organization method from the Theme-Rheme progression of Systemic Functional Linguistics.

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2. Studies on Thematic Progression Patterns and Public Speeches

2.1 Theme & Rheme and Thematic Progression Patterns

Theme and Rheme, as well as Thematic Progression Pattern, is one of the three meta-functional discourse functions of Systemic Functional Linguistics, and have important implications for revealing the textual organization and layout. Among them, theme and rheme, as two important concepts in discourse functional analysis, “were first proposed by the Prague school, and then developed by the systemic-functional school represented by Halliday, gradually becoming important theories of discourse function in Systemic Functional Linguistics” (Wei, 2019, p. 159). Theme is the starting point of information and clause. Its classification mainly includes Simple Theme, Multiple Theme and Clausal Theme. Rheme, the development information after the Theme, is the core of the narrative. Each clause has its own theme and rheme, but in the text composed of multiple clauses, there is a certain connection and change between the themes, rhemes, and theme and rheme in the preceding and following clauses, which is called the progression (Zhu, 1995). Various basic types of thematic progression pattern have been identified and summarized by linguists both at home and abroad in the past researches. This paper will adopt the four types of thematic progression pattern proposed by Zhu Yongsheng (1995) as the analysis basis.

A. Parallel Thematic Progression Pattern

A parallel thematic progression pattern is a type that repeats or maintains the same or similar theme from beginning to end. In short, the themes are the same, but the rhemes are different, namely, T1-R1, T2 (=T1) -R2, Tn (=T1) -Rn pattern.

B. Centralized Thematic Progression Pattern

The centralized thematic progression pattern, namely the same rheme thematic progression pattern, means the different rhemes, viz. all rhemes have the same or similar semantic relationship. In short, the themes are different but the rhemes are the same, namely, T1-R1, T2 (=T1)-R2 (R2=R1), Tn (=T1)-Rn (Rn=R1) pattern.

C. Continuous Thematic Progression Pattern

Continuous thematic progression pattern, namely linear thematic progression pattern, refers to the clause with themes derived from the preceding clause. The pattern is as follows: T1-R1, T2 (=R1)-R2, Tn (Rn-1)-Rn.

D. Crossing Thematic Progression Pattern

Crossing thematic progression pattern, namely the intersecting thematic progression pattern, means that the previous theme becomes the rheme of the following clause. The basic pattern is as follows: T1-R1, T2-R2 (=T1), Tn-Rn (= Tn-1).

It should be noted that he above thematic progression patterns are basic discourse progression models, and their use in real discourse is complex and varies according to different discourse genres.

2.2 Studies on Public Speeches

Public speaking is the primary means of expressing ideas and achieving goals for individuals as well as nations. Throughout history, people have also used public speaking as a key means of communication. Therefore, speechmaking is of great practicality in both Western education from ancient Greece and Chinese rhetoric from...
the Pre-Qin Period, and its ability is closely related to personal future and national destiny (Lucas, 2009). However, a good public speaking is never easy. Trying to communicate your ideas clearly and accurately to the audience, whether for the majority or the minority, sounds simple, but anyone who speaks in public knows how difficult it is (Williams, 1969). Therefore, speech strategies or training strategies for speech skills have always been the focus of researchers. For example, Kingston, Ontario and Canada (1982) proposes six key speech skills training strategies in order to achieve effective results. Researchers in many fields have carried out analysis and research on speech texts from different perspectives. Another key point of an effective speech, that is, the speech text, is the basis of the speech. A good speech is the key factor to effectively convey the gist of a speech. Therefore, the study of speech discourse has always attracted the attention of researchers.

From the perspective of communication, every link and step involved in the speech is discussed, including overcoming stage fright, choosing a topic, demonstrating ideas, and writing notes. At the same time, it also pays attention to the different usage of various kinds of speeches, such as spreading knowledge, eloquence and motivation, etc., aiming to comprehensively and systematically introduce the elements and components of speeches and master the skills of speech (Lucas, 2009).

With regard to speech teaching, speech has always been one of the important components of education. Holm (1954) emphasizes that effective public speaking plays an important role in individual ability, industrial and commercial efficiency, community and national welfare, the training of public speaking therefore has been the core concern of Western education from basic education to adult education. Taking the speech education of English majors as a typical example, Li Yuqi (2019) demonstrates the application and importance of BNC corpus in English speech teaching from three aspects: the characteristics of BNC corpus, the use of synonyms and word collocation, and the accurate expression of contextual semantics through online retrieval and statistical analysis. Zhang Xiaozhe (2020) sorts out the current situation of College students’ English speech based on undergraduate universities, and puts forward countermeasures to improve the current situation of English speech level from the perspectives of students, teachers and schools.

Stylistic perspective is also a key field in the study of speech discourse. Stylistic analysis is a powerful method to understand the meaning of speech text and explore its aesthetic value. For example, Lei XuHui & Chen Xuan (2019) studies the stylistic interpretation of the U.S. President Barack Obama’s second inaugural speech from four aspects, viz. pronunciation, vocabulary, syntax and discourse, according to Halliday’s modern stylistics theory and stylistic analysis method, to achieve a better understanding of Obama’s speech of headwords, promote the foreign language learners in English learning and enhance their English level.

In the field of systemic-functional linguistics, the analysis of speech texts is quite effective. Researchers start from various levels of systemic-functional linguistics to reveal the different characteristics of discourse. Based on the interpersonal modal system, Liu Xiao (2020) analyzes the modal verbs in Hillary Clinton’s 20 speeches and reveals how Hillary employs them to express her thoughts, so as to move the audience, which is also of certain guiding significance for English speakers. However, previous researches mostly focus on the political discourse and attempts to find the language characteristics of political speech discourse. The present study aims to explore the characteristics of discourse organization from the perspective of thematic progression and to find the thematic progression patterns and their connection with the discourse gist.
3. The Speech Text and its Background

Ivana Todorovic, a graduate student of the School of Medicine at Tsinghua university, delivered a speech on June 22, 2020. This commencement speech is not a traditional speech in the sense of school ideology and education. It is delivered in the special period of COVID-19, and its content and significance are thus characterized by the times.

The COVID-19 outbreak, which began at the end of 2019, has had a major impact on the development of various fields in China and other countries around the world, posing a huge threat to people’s lives. During the epidemic period, China’s government and medical and health institutions took a series of major and effective measures to control the spread of the severe epidemic in a timely and effective manner, and provided the world with medical supplies and advice to fight against the epidemic. In the graduation season of June 2020, China’s COVID-19 control has achieved remarkable results, and the country is also in active recovery in various fields. The speaker, Ivana Todorovic, a representative of the graduate students of the medical school, has worked with many international students to raise funds and medical supplies to support China’s fight against the virus. China’s efforts during the epidemic made her more aware of the powerful strength of China’s unity. Therefore, in such a special graduation season in China, it is typical and representative to select the speech text for discourse analysis.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 The Use of Thematic Progression Pattern in Iwana’s Speech

The thematic progression pattern in Iwana’s speech text is varied with different frequency of use, and the speech gist reflected by her discourse features also varies with the distribution, as shown in the Table 1:

| Types of thematic progression | Number | Percentage |
|------------------------------|--------|------------|
| Parallel thematic progression pattern | 6      | 25%        |
| Centralized thematic progression pattern | 9      | 37.5%      |
| Continuous thematic progression pattern | 7      | 29.2%      |
| Crossing thematic progression pattern | 2      | 8.3%       |
| Total                         | 24     | 100%       |

As is shown in the data in the above table, the use frequency of the centralized thematic progression pattern is the highest, accounting for 37.5% of the total thematic progression types. The parallel thematic pattern and the continuous thematic progression pattern are basically used in the same frequency and account for a relatively high proportion, accounting for 25% and 29.2% respectively. However, the crossing thematic progression takes up the least proportion, accounting for 8.3%. Therefore, the use of thematic progression pattern of this commencement speech is distributed as follows:

“Centralized thematic progression pattern > Continuous thematic progression pattern > Parallel thematic progression pattern > Crossing thematic progression pattern”.

In the following section we will explore the main discourse organization characteristics and the speech gist conveyed by the thematic progression model.
4.2 Thematic Progression Pattern, Discourse Characteristics and Speech Gist

4.2.1 The Centralized thematic progression pattern & expression of China’s position

The speaker’s choice of priority for the centralized thematic progression pattern is closely related to her intended message, as shown in the following examples:

Example (1):

This is a unique moment.
We are stepping up to another phase of our lives at a time of great hardship and global difficulties.

“A unique moment”, like “a time of great hardships and global difficulties”, conveys the same core message that we are facing an epidemic of severe hardship.

Example (2):

China’s governance and health care system proves to be one of the most efficient in the world. With a population of 1.4 billion, China not only has successfully controlled the transmission of the coronavirus but also assisted many other countries across the globe.

Similarly, the former rheme “the most efficient” and the latter rheme “not only has successfully controlled the transmission of the coronavirus, but also assisted many other countries across the globe” are identical in conveying China’s efficient response to the severe epidemic. While the two rhemes both describe China’s quick reaction to such a tough challenge, the latter one is more specific, clear and coherent, especially easy to highlight the correct judgment and a series of effective measures made and adopted by the Chinese government and medical institutions.

In this thematic progression pattern, the gist of the rhemes are basically related to the fight against the epidemic in China which focuses on the Chinese government’s positive results as well as the Chinese people’s devotion and unity. By employing such large frequency of centralized thematic progression pattern, this graduation speech puts emphasis on China’s fight against the COVID-19 and help form the right public opinion under the complex background of the pandemic; At the same time, the graduation speech is aimed to convey China’s achievements, arouse consensus, and deliver specific political standpoint to a large audience of students.

4.2.2 The Continuous thematic progression pattern & expression of alma mater’s position

The speaker’s emphasis on the choice of a continuous thematic progression pattern also conveys the specific gist of the speech, as shown in the following examples:

Example (3):

Friends, we are now graduating from one of the world's most prestigious universities. Tsinghua has been like a mother to us over the past months and years, guiding and nurturing us along the way, providing us with great vision and placing on us high expectations.

In the Example (3), “one of the world’s most prestigious universities” is the core of the rheme in the clause, while “Tsinghua university” is the theme of the second clause. Tsinghua University, a prestigious institution of higher learning, closely links the two clauses.

Example (4):

Throughout this time, despite the immense challenges, Tsinghua has facilitated many online conferences and webinars, which helped me nurture more skills in my field of study.
This helped me secure a job offer in Shenzhen which I am sure will lead to further growth and professional development.

As shown in Example (4), the rheme in the first clause emphasizes that online conferences and seminars held by the alma mater of Tsinghua University help the speaker with her studies, which is consistent with the theme in the second clause. Similar to the two examples above, most of the continuous thematic progression pattern in this text express the benefit Tsinghua University has brought for the speaker’s study and employment. The use of this pattern, that is, the rheme of the preceding clause being identical with the theme of the next clause, effectively realizes the coherence of the discourse, and through the end-to-end form, it closely connects the semantics of “the support of Tsinghua alma mater” and “my harvest”, and further expands and deepens the meaning.

At the meanwhile, the frequent use of this thematic progression pattern indicates that this graduation speech not only focuses on the special period of the epidemic, but also expresses sincere gratitude to the alma mater on the occasion of graduation, as well as the strong help to students during the epidemic. The continuous thematic progression pattern, in a more closely connected logical way, powerfully affects students, arouses students’ sympathy for their alma mater, and gives back to the alma mater and the society with a grateful heart.

4.2.3 The parallel thematic progression pattern & expression of individual’s position

The proportion of the parallel thematic progression pattern in this speech and the role of gist transmission should not be ignored, as shown in the following examples:

Example (5):

I saw millions of people united with one goal - to win the battle against this epidemic.
I have never seen such a collective dedication from a nation, turning things for the better by sacrificing personal convenience on a grand scale.

In the above example, the first clause and the second clause possess the same theme, namely “I”, both expressing what the speaker’s “I”, as an individual, have seen and heard during the epidemic.

Example (6):

Let's accept new challenges, think beyond our limits and keep in mind the ethics of life.
Let's undertake everything we can for the sake of unity, humanity and the international community.
Let's work together for a more promising future and prosperous world.

In example (6), the three clauses present the explicitly identical theme “Let’s”, using a typical thematic homogeneous progression pattern. In this pattern, the discourse is developed around the same subject or theme, and the rheme is constantly developing and changing. Such a structure can provide information from multiple perspectives, so as to develop a more extensive discourse, and make the discourse present more comprehensive characteristics under the same theme.

At the same time, the theme of the text is the same, mainly focusing on the individual or group of “I” or “we”. The speaker, Ivana Todorovic, is a foreign student who has witnessed China’s development and achievements. She employs her own experience and visual expression to move the audience to accept her point of view voluntarily. In addition, the pronoun “we” integrates the speaker herself and the general audience of graduates as a whole. While expressing personal positions, “we” is persuasive and sends out the call that the majority of young students unite as one, contribute their joint strength, win the victory of the epidemic and make their own
contribution to the world and mankind. A series of discourse organization thus features the same theme, which unites the broad audience of graduates and conveys the speech gist of calling for students’ active participation in the cause of contributing to humanity.

4.2.4 The Crossing thematic progression pattern

There are few examples of the crossing thematic progression pattern in the text, as is shown below:

Example (7):

*During the COVID-19 outbreak, I got the best opportunity to understand China.*

*I saw millions of people united with one goal - to win the battle against this epidemic.*

In the above example, the theme of the former clause, “During the COVID-19 outbreak”, is consistent with the rheme of the latter clause “this epidemic”, both indicating the special period of COVID-19 outbreak. However, it is obvious that the correspondence between the theme of the preceding clause and the rheme of the following clause is not so direct and clear, and its discourse features are complex. As a result, this thematic progression pattern is not advantageous in terms of conveying the speaker’s position, emotion and the call.

5. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, this paper, based on a Tsinghua university graduate’s commencement speech, analyzes its thematic progression pattern, discourse features, speech purpose and its gist, identifies four main types of thematic progression pattern, namely the parallel thematic progression pattern, the centralized thematic progression pattern, the continuous thematic progression pattern and the crossing thematic progression pattern and explores the relationship between the thematic progression types and the state, alma mater and individual’s position conveyed through the patterns from the perspective of the Theme-Rheme thematic progression pattern of Systemic Functional Linguistics. It is intended to provide reference for the organization method of speech discourse during a specific epidemic period, convey the correct positive position, and provide spiritual support for the audience to overcome this tough challenge.

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