Information Development in Arabic Research Article Abstract

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Abstract:This paper attempted to see how thematic progression patterns are used in the research article abstracts written in English by research article writers from the Arabic Literature discipline. To this end, 20 research article abstracts were extracted from the Arabic Literature Journal published in 2012 and were analyzed based on thematic progression model proposed by McCabe (1999). The data analysis reported greater use of the constant thematic progression pattern compared to the linear thematic progression pattern. This study may have implication for research article writers in the Arabic Literature discipline.

Keywords: Theme, Rheme, Thematic Progression, Research Article Abstract

Introduction

In academic writing, writing a coherent text is one of the main concerns. In this regard, Halliday and Hasan (1976) argue that a coherent text needs to have texture. They add that the concept of texture is entirely appropriate to express the property of being a text. As they noted, texture consists of structural and non-structural aspects. The former refers to inter-sentence or intra-sentence structures like thematic organization and thematic progression structures, whereas, the latter refers to the cohesive ties between different elements in different sentences like references, substitutions, ellipses, and conjunctions. In the same line with Halliday and Hasan (1976), Belmont and McCabe (1998) assert that one way of achieving cohesion in text is through thematic progression, which involve the relationship between clauses based on the information contained in their themes and rhemes.

According to Halliday (1985), theme is an element which serves as the point of departure of the message and what the speaker has in mind to start with. It is the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, and it organizes the clause as a message. The remainder of the message is called the rheme. Therefore, a clause consists of a theme combined with a rheme and the structure is expressed by order. The order for this is theme followed by rheme. Halliday (1985) elaborates further by stating that, theme is what the clause is about and it comes in the first position, but this position is not what defines the theme; it is a means which realizes the function of the theme.

Theme structure has been studies by many researchers during recent years. They have focused on this notion across different languages (Ventola, 1993); various disciplines (Ebrahimi and Khedri, 2011; Ghadessy, 1999; Whittaker, 1995); within discipline (Lores, 2004; Martinez, 2003; Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi, 2012); essay writing (North, 2005); and composition writing (Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008). Yet, despite a sustained interest in theme structure, little research has examined the thematic progression in the research article abstract. One notable exception is

Ghadessy's (1999) study of the notion of theme in academic research article abstract of different disciplines focusing solely on thematic organization but thematic progression patterns. Therefore, this study was put forward aiming to find out the thematic progression patterns used in research article abstracts (RA abstract) written in English by writers from Arabic Literature discipline.

The rational behind the focus on the thematic progression are as follows: 1) thematic progression frequently links a clause to the proceeding clause (Hawes & Thomas, 1997), 2) it is a useful guide to the rhetorical path that the writer is following (Bloor & Bloor, 1995), and 3) it helps in creating cohesive text (Belmonte & McCabe, 1998).

Methodology

Corpus

This study was carried out on a corpus of 20 RA abstracts extracted from 20 RA published in Arabic Literature Journal that publish by Tehran University in Iran. All the RA abstracts were written in English and published in 2012 issues of the Arabic Literature Journal.

Research Article Abstract

RA abstract, in Ghadessy (1999), defined as:
1. An RA abstract is a condensed and compressed piece of language (Sinclair,1988) that gives information on the content and organization of a larger piece of written communication. In other words it is discourse on discourse.
2. An RA abstract is usually written by the author of the article for a community of professional people who have a vested interest in the subject matter of the abstract. The writer may or may not be known to the readers.
3. An RA abstract is an independent minimal text that can stand on its own. There is almost no redundancy in the language. Information is packed especially in the nominal groups of clauses. The organization of the abstract reflects the organization of the academic article. Therefore, this study intends to focus on analyzing the thematic organization of the RA abstract since the analyses could give helpful insights regarding its underlying structures of the RA abstract especially to the Arabic Literature writers in writing their RA abstracts in English.

Analytical Model

The notion of thematic progression was introduced by the Prague Linguist, Danes (1974), in order to conceptualize the role of theme in text organization and construction. Danes points out that the choice of themes of individual messages in a text is not a matter of chance-is not random and without structural connection to the text. Danes' model was developed by McCabe (1999). She developed a number of types of thematic progression (TP) that manifest differently in different genres including linear TP, constant TP, split theme TP, and split Rheme Progression.

A) Linear TP
McCabe (1999) refers to this as the most elementary or basic thematic progression, where the item in the Rheme of first clause becomes the Theme of the subsequent clause, as represented in
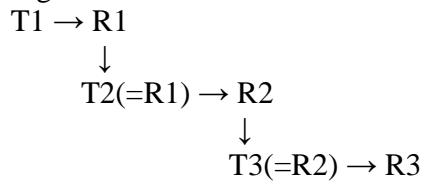
Figure 1.
T1 → R1
    ↓
    T2(=R1) → R2
        ↓
        T3(=R2) → R3

Figure 1 linear TP

Example: Ibn Hesham sees three divisions for the Arabic sentence: the noun sentence, the verb sentence and ***the adverb sentence***. ***The adverb sentence*** in his view is that in which a time or place adverb or a prepositional phrase is the predicate proceeded by a negative or interrogative article such as:…….

B) Constant TP

In this pattern, the item in the theme of the first clause is also selected as the theme of the following clause, though not necessarily with identical wording. It is represented in Figure 2.
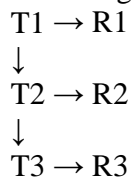T1 → R1
↓
T2 → R2
↓
T3 → R3
Figure 2 constant TP
Example: ***Salm ibn Amr khasir*** The First Abbasid poet born in Basra. ***He*** was a pupil and narrator of the poet Bashar ibn Burd. ***He*** acquired his nickname (the Loser), when he sold a copy of the Quran in exchange for a book of verse; other explanations are also given.

C) Split Theme TP

This pattern is characterized as the thematic progression where the item in the theme of the first clause functions as a hyper theme, as an element from which the theme of the subsequent clauses is derived. It is represented in Figure 3.
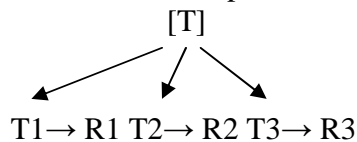
        [T]
   ↙ ↓ ↘
T1→ R1 T2→ R2 T3→ R3
Example: ***Table 1 and table 2*** present the results. ***Table 1*** shows the frequency and the percentage of theme types and patterns. ***Table 2*** present the result of chi-square analysis.

D) TP with a split Rheme
In this pattern, the rheme of the first clause is split into two items, then each in turn being taken as a theme element in subsequent clauses. It is represented in Figure 4.
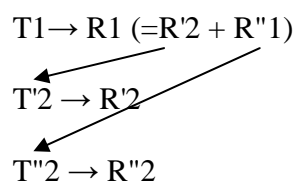
T1→ R1 (=R'2 + R"1)

T'2 → R'2

T"2 → R"2

Figure 4 TP with a split Rheme

Example: There are marked differences in behaviour between the planning and ***implementation stages***, as well as between the ***fiscal policy*** of EU countries and other OECD countries. ***Planned fiscal policy*** is a-cyclical for EU countries and counter-cyclical for the other countries. However, ***in the implementation stage***, the EU countries react pro-cyclically to unexpected changes in the output gap, while the responses of the other OECD countries are a-cyclical.

Unit of Analysis

This study adopted t-unit as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is defined by Fries (1994) as a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (p.318). The rationale behind this selection was that:

> "Analyzing theme at the level of t-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in large amounts of text, and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause" (Fries & Francis, 1992 as cited in North, 2005, p.6).

Procedures

First, 20 RA abstract were extracted from 20 RA published in 2012 in the journal of Arabic Literature published in Tehran university. Second, the data were analyzed based on McCabe's (1999) model of thematic progression. Third, the frequency of thematic progression patterns in the corpus was calculated.

One problem with textual analysis is that there is always the danger of making mistakes in interpretation. To increase the reliability in the analysis, four RA abstracts from the corpus were also analyzed by an experienced researcher in Applied Linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

Result and Discussion

This study intended to show the use of the different thematic progression patterns in the RA abstracts written by Arabic writers in English. As mentioned in the methodology section of this article, this study used McCabe's (1999) analytical framework. Following her model, those themes for which the reader has to go back more than two clauses to find a previously mentioned concept were put aside and not considered as units of analysis (p. 270). In addition, some themes

were not related to other clauses, and they could not be categorized under any of the conventional thematic progression patterns. These themes were called miscellaneous.

Considering the aforementioned points, the data were analyzed and the frequency of different thematic progression patterns was calculated. The obtained results were presented in table 1. According to the figures in Table 1, Arabic writers preferred to use more constant thematic progression pattern (example 1) compared to linear thematic progression pattern (example 2). This finding was in line with Wang (2007) and Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012), but in contrast to Fries (1983), and Alonso and McCabe (2000). Wang (2007) and Ebrahimi and Ebrahimi (2012) declared that there are several main thematic progression patterns, which depend on different text types. As evidence, in narrative-type text, we often repeat the theme of one clause into the theme of the subsequent clause (constant pattern) (p.4). To Fries (1983), thematic progression of an academic text, RA abstract in this study, needs to have high incidence of cross referential links from the rheme of the clause to the theme of the next clause, as the academic text presents complex arguments in which each successive idea is an expansion of an idea in the previous sentence (p.124). As with Fries' (1983), Alonso and McCabe (2000) assert that linear pattern provides more of a dynamic text which works well with explanation as it allows writers to add points always moving from given idea to a new one (p.3).

A possible justification for the greater occurrences of the constant thematic progression pattern might be the nature of the RA abstract genre. RA abstract as Ghadessy (1999) pointed out is very short therefore writers can not develop the ideas and provide more details. They need to present the major points of the RA in some sentences with a word limit. Therefore the more occurrence of the constant pattern of thematic progression is not surprising. Beside this justification, writers need to keep in mind that the use of linear thematic progression pattern could highly contribute to cohesion of their RA abstracts. Writer should also know that using linear thematic progression pattern, as McCabe (1999) states, can ensure that the readers are constantly "with them" in terms of point of departure, thus elaborating on concepts in a way which allows readers to optimally build up the conceptual framework (p.190). Wang (2007) adds that high frequency of linear pattern in text has more dynamic effect on readers, and also causes more cohesion between ideas and sentences in the text.

Example 1: ***Salm ibn Amr khasir*** The First Abbasid poet born in Basra. ***He*** was a pupil and narrator of the poet Bashar ibn Burd. ***He*** acquired his nickname (the Loser), when he sold a copy of the Quran in exchange for a book of verse; other explanations are also given.

Example 2: Ibn Hesham sees three divisions for the Arabic sentence: the noun sentence, the verb sentence and ***the adverb sentence***. ***The adverb sentence*** in his view is that in which a time or place adverb or a prepositional phrase is the predicate proceeded by a negative or interrogative article such as:…….

The result also showed that the Arabic writers did not show any inclination to include the split rheme and split theme progression patterns. Putting these thematic progression patterns aside could be justified based on the word count limit imposed on writers in writing the RA abstracts.

Based on the figures in Table 1, miscellaneous Pattern which is outside McCabe's patterns was utilized in the RA abstracts (Example 3). According to Wang (2007), the overall effect of using miscellaneous pattern is in creating text which is lacking in the development of ideas (p. 6). Contrary to Wang's (2007) suggestion that miscellaneous chain distorts the development of ideas, McCabe's (1999) suggests that miscellaneous bond is crucial to the development of the discourse and can provide thematic continuity in the text because of the accessibility of their references to the reader. Sometimes the reader goes back to more than three clauses to relate propositions together even though the clauses are far from the thematic rules, and sometimes some elements even they introduced for the first time but the should be thematized (e.g., temporal adverbials) (p.271). So there are only two justifications for using miscellaneous pattern in the text, one, if and only if the reference is available in the text but it needs to go back for more than three clauses, second, there is an important element that should be thematized. Other than these, miscellaneous will result in distorting the idea development. It seems that in the analyzed corpus, the first justification could justify the use of miscellaneous thematic progression patterns as far as writers need to present new information representing a new part of RA in thematic position.

Example 3: These similarities indicate that these two works follow the same style and internal structure. ***The authors of this article*** try to compare the stylistic features of these two works and identify their similarities and stylistic subtlities so that there is better awareness of the similarities and differences between these two collections in Arabic and Persian and readers are helped to have a better understanding of them.

In summery, Arabic writers should take into account that thematic progression is very important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to this relationship, the reader may not be able to comprehend the text.

Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of the *Thematic Progression Patterns* in the Arabic RA abstracts

		Frequency	Percentage
1	Constant Pattern	59	35%
2	Linear Pattern	38	22%
3	Split Theme pattern	-	-
4	Split Rheme Pattern	-	-
5	Miscellaneous Pattern	72	43%
	Total	169	100%

Conclusion

A focus on theme and rheme structure in a clause can have startling and immediate results in cohesion of the text. Writers can consciously and strategically draw on this knowledge to construct a cohesive text. The cohesion in the texts can be improved dramatically if attention is given to thematic progression in texts. The relationship between theme and rheme is essential in creating a cohesive writing. Thus, the insights gained from theme and rheme pattern are valuable in writing cohesive texts.

Yan, Mcdonald and Musheng (1993) state that if theme is defined as the point of departure of the message, then its significance can only be understood by seeing how it contributes to the progress of the message in texts. The patterns of thematic progression are identified by reference to the way that a text moves forward from theme to rheme, within each clause, and between clauses. From this point of view, we can see the theme/rheme structure of each clause as textually motivated, organizing the text as a whole (p. 241). So the knowledge of thematicity helps the text coherence.

This study aimed to shed the light on the thematic progression patterns used in the RA abstracts written by the Arabic writers in English. The results of data analysis depict that two thematic progression patterns (linear and constant) were used in the RA abstracts. The result showed that constant thematic progression pattern was used greater than linear thematic progression pattern which discussed based on the short space dedicated to the realization of the RA abstract in the RA.

Based on the reported results, writers' understanding of how texts are created and interpreted would be much poorer without the concept of theme and thematic progression. Therefore, in RA abstract writing, theme –rheme patterns are important in guiding the reader through the logical paths constructed by the writer. If little attention is paid to this pattern, the writer's attempt to help readers to comprehend the RA abstract will be destroyed.

This study has implications for writers and researchers especially in Arabic Literature discipline where abstract writing in English has its own significance. By increasing their awareness towards the importance of the thematic progression patterns, they could improve cohesion of RA abstracts.

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