Ampersand 2 (2015) 93–100

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Ampersand

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/amper

Thematic progression in the writing of students and professionals

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Advances in thematic progression theory for teachers of journalistic writing.
- Thematic progression as a bridge between sentence level and discourse level.
- Thematic progression in students' essays and two leading British newspapers.
- Suggested variations on Daneš' progression types.
- Marking rhetorical transitions with 'breaks' (non-participant themes).

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 19 November 2014
Received in revised form
25 June 2015
Accepted 29 June 2015
Available online 3 July 2015

Keywords:
Thematic progression
Student writing
Newspapers

ABSTRACT

This article outlines advances in thematic progression theory in the hope they may be useful to teachers of writing, especially with non-native and non-European students. Thematic progression denotes the strategies available to writers for linking the themes and rhemes in a clause to those of surrounding clauses. It is a key factor in the structuring of information because it acts as a bridge between sentence level and discourse level, coordinating cohesion and coherence. This paper compares the use of thematic progression in essays by students on a course leading to MA studies in journalism, media and communications with that in two leading British newspapers. It considers how assignment writing could be improved generally by teaching the rudiments of progression theory. If students' assignments are to be clear in their development but also varied and interesting for the reader, additional progression skills are required. In particular, this paper recommends certain variations on Daneš' progression types, as well as the use of more *breaks* (non-participant themes) to mark rhetorical transitions in the text. Familiarisation with the thematic progression in tabloids and broadsheets, respectively, should provide an overview of a range of progression from formal to outspoken, which would raise awareness of what is available, even if not all elements are appropriate for all types of academic writing.

1. Introduction

This article highlights certain recent additions to thematic progression theory which, if taught, should broaden our students' arsenal of choices when structuring their essays in English, whether suitable or not for the specific kind of academic writing they are studying. It further proposes familiarising them with the ways thematic progression is employed in two newspapers, a tabloid and a broadsheet, in order to give them an overview of the range of progression options, from more populistic or hortatory to more formal. While these newspapers are of course especially relevant to media students, an increased understanding of thematic progression per se, including of variations on Daneš' progression types and *breaks* (outlined in the section *Theoretical model*), should be helpful with any manner of writing tasks.

An understanding of how information is structured in clauses and the different methods for combining these elements into stretches of discourse is essential for cohesive and coherent writing in English. Theme and rheme act as the building bricks of cohesion intra-clausally. But their role in thematic progression, which fans out across whole texts and indicates where topics begin and end, also points up a text's underlying organisation, thereby giving them a vital place in coherence. While native speakers may subconsciously acquire such understanding through extensive reading without it having to be taught, overseas students are less likely to have had sufficient exposure to texts in the target language and, even with lengthy exposure, may find it difficult to discern any

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.amper.2015.06.002

patterns in information structuring in a foreign language. The reason for this could be that there are too many different elements of the unfamiliar language to concentrate on simultaneously. Alternatively, students' assumptions about information structure based on the patterns of their own first language might simply not hold for the one they are studying.

It must at times seem to teachers that we are repeatedly admonishing students for their poor essay structure, yet we are not providing them with the basic knowledge necessary to resolve the problem. If our students are to become coherent writers of English we should explain the principles on which coherent communication depends. Cook (1989) has offered a suitably succinct and helpful explanation:

> "**Communication might be defined as the conversion of new information into given information, and a successful communicator as a person who correctly assesses the state of knowledge of his or her interlocutor. If we misjudge, and treat what is given as new, we will be boring; in the reverse case when we assume the new to be given, we will be incomprehensible" (**Cook, 1989**:64).**

The linguistic term for the structuring of given and new information is *thematisation*. This involves the positioning of information in a clause. That which is familiar, given, or retrievable from the text or context is typically placed at the start of the clause, while material that is unfamiliar is placed linearly to the right of it. The two parts are referred to as *theme* and *rheme*, respectively. Although theme usually anchors a text, or highlights a (sub)topic, rheme is conventionally used to comment on the theme. These themes and rhemes then form links with the themes and rhemes of subsequent clauses to allow the text to move forward in what is known as thematic progression (Daneš, 1974, 1995). The need to focus not merely upon traditional sentence grammar but also on the higher level, or combinatory, aspects of discourse is amply demonstrated, if not necessarily recognised, throughout the world whenever students (whose exposure to text structure has usually been confined to the teaching of the 'parts of speech') fail to see the textual wood for the trees of sentence grammar:

> **"Low-level learners might be trapped in unnatural patterns (of Theme-Rheme) owing to limited grammatical resources or lack of confidence in a new L2, but most advanced learners are likely to have a good feel for creating topic frameworks and orienting their audience" (**McCarthy, 1991**:58).**

In the past decade or so applied linguists, especially in East Asia (eg Liu, 2004; Wang, 2007; Yang, 2008; Li, 2009) have increasingly rallied to the idea that teaching thematic progression will help improve the coherence of students' writing. Articles illustrating this point therefore introduce the concepts of theme and rheme as in Halliday (1985) and thematic progression as in Daneš (1974), recommending that teachers employ them in the classroom. Unfortunately, while raising awareness in this way is undoubtedly valuable it does not mean that teachers will readily be able to use the knowledge to enable learners to choose appropriate thematisation choices to create natural-sounding patterns. This is perhaps a problem relating less to a student's level of English than to whether or not her/his L1 employs similar information structuring.

Barriers to teaching thematisation have included reluctance to tackle these concepts in the face of unresolved debate as to where theme ends and rheme begins. Space does not permit a detailed review of the different positions here, but they have included Firbas (1995), Fries (1981), Halliday (1985), Thomas (1991), Davies (1993), Hasan and Fries (1995), Ravelli (1995), Berry (1995), Hawes and Thomas (1997), Hawes (2001), and Fawcett (2007). This present study uses Halliday's (1985/1994) delimitation of theme as everything up to and including the first ideational element, with minor amendments. But the real point here is that for teaching purposes it matters little which definition of theme is preferred. Students need to present an appropriate balance of thematic and rhematic material and to make it clear which is which by placing them in the accepted position – before or after each other – and allowing the text to move forward by employing appropriate progression types.

A further problem has been the assumption that Halliday's (1985) model of theme and Daneš' (1974) three progression types are definitive. This is the opposite problem to that discussed above. Both seminal theoretical contributions in linguistic history, these theories nevertheless require updating and possibly fine-tuning to suit the analysis of different discourse genres and different kinds of research. Accordingly potential modifications will be suggested below.

2. Data

The student data for this study comprise just short of 20,000 words of essays on the topic of The Impact of the Internet in the Twenty-First Century, written in August 2009 by 18 international students, at roughly B2 level, taking InterComm, a pre-MA course at the University of Leeds for international communications, media and journalism. Prior to writing these essays, the students had not been explicitly coached in thematic progression. However, they had completed several InterComm tasks relating to cohesion and coherence in academic writing, to heighten their awareness of discourse structure, the ordering of elements at sentence level and whole text level, as well as how these interact together.

These essays are compared and contrasted with approximately 20,000 words written by professional journalists in editorials from the British newspapers The Sun and The Times in October 1991 (Hawes, 2001; PhD corpus), plus another 20,000 from September 2008 (Hawes, 2010a). In both cases, the newspaper data consisted of ten consecutive days' worth of editorials from each paper.

Whereas a journalistic article could potentially be of almost any length, depending on the importance of the topic to the paper or its owner and the projected interest value for the reader, a newspaper editorial is a relatively stable subgenre, fixed over the years through practice becoming 'tradition'. From 1991 to 2008 there was as good as no change whatsoever in either The Sun or The Times as far as the format and length of their editorials is concerned (Hawes, 2010a). Unlike the fluidity of articles in general, therefore, editorials – particularly in these specific newspapers, which are in effect Britain's most popular tabloid and Britain's traditionally most respected newspaper – allow a degree of clarity and certainty regarding norms. It should also be mentioned that editorials are the time-honoured site where newspapers overtly express their own views on given issues, as opposed to (supposedly) reporting the facts. This means that we can be fairly sure they are the most carefully crafted of all articles.

To specify the format of this subgenre, all editorials in both The Sun and The Times begin with a title, often involving a pun or other word-play, followed by a brief lead in bold or larger font and then the body of the text. In The Sun the lead and the concluding sentence are typically both bold and underlined. Of greater relevance to our students: both newspapers typically include three articles per editorial section, The Sun's being approximately 120 words long each; those in The Times 550 words each. The Sun sometimes extends this to four or even five articles, which are then correspondingly shorter, and occasionally reduces the total to two articles if it wishes to include a double-length article on a matter of

importance. The Times sometimes reduces its total to two articles for the same reason.

3. Theoretical model

The thematisation model on which this investigation was based comprised, firstly, an extended Hallidayan definition of theme and, secondly, a modified version of Daneš' progression types. Halliday's (1985:39–54) theme can be summarised as: 1. the start of the clause, 2. everything up to and including the first ideational element, and 3. what the message will be about. However, Thomas (1991:253) claims that 'in unmarked sentences, [aboutness] is generally conveyed through the grammatical subject'. Therefore, in cases where a Hallidayan theme would fail to show what the message would be about, I extend it to include the grammatical subject. For instance, to simple adjuncts (italicised in the following examples) which for Halliday suffice as theme, such as '*once* I was a real turtle' or '*very carefully* she put him back on his feet' (1985:39), I would include 'I' in the first and 'she' in the second. This position finds support in North (2005), who notes the close correspondence between topical Theme and grammatical subject (2005:437). Halliday himself, with Matthiessen, in an updated version of Introduction to Functional Grammar, has in any case loosened the theoretical link between theme and aboutness, proposing instead a definition of theme as: 'that which locates and orients the clause within its context'(2004:64).

According to Alonso, Belmonte & McCabe, ESL/EFL teachers have focused too much on intra-clausal grammatical errors and neglected to train students in the production of coherent discourse (1998:15). Arguably they need to be provided with knowledge and skills in the area of thematic progression, i.e. the linking of clauses into extended text by the repetition and transformation of elements in their themes and rhemes. Daneš (1974), the first to write on progression theory, posits three types: constant, simple linear, and derived progression.

In *constant progression*, successive clauses retain the same theme or referent in initial position, as in the following extract from The Times on problems within the Labour Party. The theme(s) in question is/are italicised in the examples.

Example 1. Constant Progression

> **…intriguing begins against the leader, matters always come to a head at some point. And until they do *the party* cannot make any progress or see its future clearly. *The Labour Party* should determine that, for it, that moment has come now. *The party* may decide that… (The Times: 15.9.2008).**

This may be represented as **Th1–Th2, Th2–Th3, Th3–Th4**, etc (where Th denotes theme, i.e. the theme of clause 1 links up with the theme of clause 2, the theme of clause 2 with the theme of clause 3, and so on). Students should be informed that such repetition is a forceful way to make a point but warned that it may also be perceived as overly 'demagogic'. Such sequences of constant progression were once avoided in The Times. The fact that by 2008 The Times had begun to repeat elements more liberally (Hawes, 2010a:46) hints at a populistic move down-market by that paper.

With *simple linear progression*, a theme repeats or transforms the rheme of the preceding clause and this may be depicted as **Rh1–Th2, Rh2–Th3, Rh3-TH4**, etc (Rh denoting rheme). Simple linear progression is a logical means of creating cohesion but less obtrusive than constant progression. It may however seem plodding if overused. An example below is taken from a typical Sun editorial which uses a member of the Royal Family as a vehicle for praising British soldiers. The progression in this case is from *true hero* in the rheme to the theme *Brave Ben*:

Example 2. Simple Linear Progression

> **PRINCE Harry was so moved by shattered marine Ben McBean's fight for life that he publicly hailed him as a "true hero". *Brave Ben* was barely conscious after losing an arm and a leg as the two comrades flew home from Afghanistan (The Sun: 17.9.2008).**

In *derived progression*, the themes connect to an implicit overall 'hypertheme' of the whole text (which could be shown as **Th(D1), Th(D2), Th(D3)**, etc, where an implied link to the hypertheme is represented by the 'D' in brackets). Particularly in longer texts, such as those by MA and other more advanced students, derived progression is a way of reminding readers of the main topic or of keeping them focused. In the next example, *Inflation, industry, wage settlements* and *sterling* are, in context, all derived from the hypertheme 'the economy and the coming general elections':

Example 3. Derived Progression

> ***Inflation* is expected to tumble further today. *Industry* is virtually strike- free and *wage settlements* are the lowest in years. *Yet sterling* hangs on the Ropes like a battered boxer because opinion polls suggest Labour might win the next election (The Sun: 11.10.1991).**

To complete this picture, it is necessary to at least add certain subcategories to Daneš' constant progression. I suggests three: constant gap progression, constant type progression and constant rheme progression. *Constant gap* progression, firstly, functions as does Daneš' constant, but omitting one or more clauses between the first theme and its repetition. It is thus less 'heavy' than Daneš' constant progression, which requires that the repetition involve adjacent clauses. In the following example two themes (*Graham Taylor and He*) with the same referent are linked by a pronominalization across a gap of a single clause ("*It did him no good*"), in which Taylor is an object referent in rheme but not theme:

Example 4. Constant Gap Progression

> ***ENGLAND manager Graham Taylor* was interviewed on TV for just 15 minutes after the match with Turkey. It did him no good. *He* could not explain why his team were so outshone… (The Sun: 18.10.1991).**

Constant type progression, secondly, repeats the lexicogrammatical *category* of theme rather than the referent itself. The example below employs four distinct theme categories three times in succession: 1. Named participant; 2. Female participant; 3. Government participant; and 4. a rhemeless, or ellided, clause. In other words, all three are simultaneously instances of a name, a female and a member of the government (at that time), as well as lacking a complete theme-rheme structure. None of these four separate parallels are coincidences. Rather all the elements are there by conscious choice. The subsequent fourth clause is included merely as context for the citation:

Example 5. Constant Type Progression

> ***Siobhan McDonagh. Joan Ryan. Fiona Mactaggart*. These are not the names of towering political figures… (The Times: 15.9.2008).**

Thirdly, constant rheme progression is the repetition of one rheme by another, irrespective of their themes. An instance of this, in which The Sun attacks a Labour leader, who was at one time predicted to win the elections of 1992, is found in Example 6. Here the constant rhematic elements comprise three repetitions of *can + infinitive verb*:

Example 6. Constant Rheme Progression

Neil Kinnock can gabble and he can run. But he cannot hide the truth (The Sun: 21.10.1991). (underlined in original)

The claim is that with these extra progression subtypes a text may be rendered more cohesive and coherent. Moreover, any of Daneš' progression types or of the additions may be repeated several times in a sequence corresponding to a train of thought in text. Alternatively, such a sequence may be composed of any combination of two or even three of them. The Sun, together with one or two other tabloids, has in the past stood out for its tub-thumping style, thanks partly to its more frequent use of constant progression (Hawes, 2001). One extraordinary oratorical outburst, reproduced below, relied for its fervour on constant progression, reinforced by constant rheme progression. In this example, exceptionally, the whole parallel repetition unit has been italicised. Within a short stretch of text, there are no less than six occurrences of the theme *it* (including four of *So it*) and four of the rheme *had to go*, as well as one gap (*The management had saved …*), i.e. constant gap progression is also employed:

Example 7. Constant Theme + Constant Rheme

***[TV AM]* is TWICE as popular with viewers as any of its rivals. *So, naturally, it had to go.* It has set standards of entertainment that the pompous BBC would recognise only in a dream. *So it had to go*. The management had saved the company from going bust. *So it had to go*. It broke the monopolistic unions and won an historic strike. *So, naturally, it had to go* (The Sun: 17.10.91).**

There is a problem, if students are to use thematic progression theory to improve their writing, in that Daneš' model does not cover the situation where one progression sequence ends and/or a different one begins, and how this is achieved. In fact the choice of a non-participant *break* (Hawes, 2010b) as theme (i.e. one that is not a human, animal or any other entity and therefore could not be Subject of a clause) often marks the transition from one rhetorical sequence to another, or from one paragraph to another. This is particularly true of journalism, the profession to which our students aspire, but also of discourse in general to a slightly lesser degree.

These 'breaks' comprise WH- and polar interrogatives, IT and THERE predicates, verbal groups, bound clauses and annexes (where a part of the minimal clause structure is elided, e.g. there is no verb). The difference between progression types and breaks is that progressions generally constitute a link from the theme of one clause to the theme of another, while breaks do the opposite, i.e. they break this (potential) sequence, often forming the end of a progression or the beginning of a new one. Breaks may therefore be one of the commonest links between sentence-level and text-level progression strategies. In other words they play a role in connecting sentence level cohesion to discourse level coherence.

Among these breaks there are specific options that are relatively more marked or unmarked. Least marked, i.e. most rhetorically neutral, of all are *bound clauses* where an entire subordinate clause in initial position acts as theme of a sentence. The most marked, and therefore most strongly indicative of a change in discourse direction, are exclamatives, annexes (sentence fragments, which depend upon the previous clause or sentence to make sense, while also providing additional comment on it) and WH-interrogatives (which thematise *who, what, where, when, why*, etc). In an example of what I refer to as an *exclamative break*, The Sun employs repeated WH- elements in successive clauses on the subject of interest rate cuts. Note that, whereas the author considers breaks to be sufficient theme and duly italicises them in the following examples, most theorists would include the subsequent noun groups in theme:

Example 8. Exclamative Break

***What* a Christmas present it would be. *And how* [Gordon Brown]'d love to play Santa! (The Sun: 15.9.2008).**

An example of an annex in The Times, reacting to a particular view of grammar, consists of just a single word, *heresy*:

Example 9. Annex Break

"Spelling is a triviality, and grammar is of no importance so long as we make our meaning plain." *Heresy!* (The Times: 15.9.08).

The following exemplifies an interrogative break (author's underlining) but also, more importantly, how a break may double as a powerful rhetorical weapon:

Example 10. Interrogative Break as an Offencive Weapon

***THE BBC* will not be bullied by any political party. *That* is the arrogant reply from deputy Director General, John Birt, to complaints of bias in its news coverage of the Tory conference debate on the Health Service. *He* says 'any reasonable observer' can see the BBC presents the news with integrity and impartiality. *Does Mr Birt* own a different dictionary to the rest of us? (The Sun: 21.10.1991).**

This passage progresses by means of simple linear links, detailing Mr Birt's stance. However, the theme of the final clause, *Does Mr Birt*, changes the direction of the progression and begins a more direct attack on the BBC. Although this final theme involves repetition of Mr Birt, the sense of a continuing progression sequence is not nearly as strong as the effect produced by the mood switch to interrogative. This grammatical change in mood overrides the effect of the lexical repetition and changes its rhetorical direction, rising to a different level of attack.

4. Methodology

Having briefly reviewed Daneš' progression types and introduced proposals for some additions to complete them, the next step was to compare these with the use of progression in students' writing. The analytical procedure was to first locate and number each independent clause in the students' writing, as well as in that of the professionals. Next the theme of each clause and the category of Daneš progression (and any others discernible) at work across each inter-clause boundary were identified. Then the students' use of theme-rheme and thematic progression was compared with that in The Times and The Sun. Finally I formulated hypotheses as to the rhetorical effects of these particular progression types, considered which progression principles might be worth teaching students,

and which progression strategies they ought to employ more or less frequently.

5. Results and discussion

Overall, there is a pleasant surprise to begin with. Daneš' progression categories occur in student writing with roughly the same frequently as they do in our two newspapers in 2008 (see Table 1, below). Simple linear progressions are employed at 22% of clause boundaries - exactly the same figure as in The Sun. The Times has slightly less of these (16%), but correspondingly more constant progression (20%), possibly feeling its readers require extra help processing its much longer texts. However, this figure barely diverges from the students' frequency of 18% for constant progression. In only one Daneš category is the students' progression anything vaguely resembling an outlier, namely derived progression, which they employ in 15% of potential cases. This is a little lower than in either newspaper and suggests students concentrate somewhat too much on local cohesion at the expense of whole-text coherence. Perhaps they should be encouraged to periodically remind their readers of the overriding topic. With regard to breaks the picture is different. Here students underuse the available options, except for *it* predicates, which they overuse, suggesting they simply lack awareness of break types (see Table 2, below).

Differences in students' thematic progression as compared to that in the newspapers fall into two broad categories. Assuming that newspaper text is suitably representative (and it is, after all, probably the most-read text type in existence, after emails), then one could argue that students either employ relatively too few or too many of a given progression type, or else they use progression inappropriately. For example, constant progression was used disproportionately often by weaker students, resulting at worst in a series of unrelated statements about the topic theme. Used skilfully, constant progression is a vital ingredient in persuasive discourse. However, its unskilful employment can create a clumsiness that unnecessarily labours the obvious. Students arguably require coaching in alternative progression types, particularly simple linear progression and the suggested variations on constant progression.

On the other hand, giving priority to derived progression produces a more academic impression, but also assumes relatively more background knowledge on the part of the reader (who must make the connection with the hypertheme from which the themes are derived). Weaker or lower level students may lack awareness of the need to keep this hypertheme constantly in mind. Simple linear progression, lastly, can lend an aura of logic to a sequence but, if used unimaginatively, it can also degenerate into a plodding succession of links, essentially stating no more than 'this means … this means … this means, etc'.

The most basic difficulty with students' progression is when they employ no discernable theme-rheme structure at all. If used consciously, this can be sophisticated strategic ellipsis, but it too often betrays a simple lack of control on the part of the student. It is most likely to occur if the writer attempts an unusually long sentence and loses her/his way. Closely related to this difficulty are random theme changes with no clear link between clauses, showing students have little knowledge of progression theory and are quite likely non-readers in English. Some learners fail to consider their audience and place material in theme which is completely new, or at least insufficiently known to the reader. Still others include too many elements within theme, making it top-heavy or ambivalent. One result of this is that the progression pattern is obscured.

Progression patterns from 1991 to 2008 have changed in both newspapers, particularly the Times, which is moving down market and simplifying its underlying information structure (Hawes, 2010a:46). Whether this is due to declining literacy in the readership, changes in the way people read, or simply an attempt to draw a broader audience is beyond the scope of this research to say. Competition from various new media is driving modernisation and it seems likely that readers no longer focus on the text with the concentration they once did, perhaps more often skimming and scanning text than before. This may in turn be leading editors to spell out more clearly the information structure of their articles through an increasing use of constant progression and simple linear progression.

Table 1, below, compares the incidence of Daneš' progression types, and certain variations, in student writing and newspapers. Table 2, later below, does the same for the frequency of occurrence of 'breaks' in progressions.

Table 1
Occurrence of Daneš' and other progression types.

	Students	The Sun	The Times
Simple Linear:	22% (22)	22% (63)	16% (147)
Derived:	12% (12)	18% (50)	15% (133)
Constant:	18% (18)	17% (48)	20% (186)
Constant gap:	10% (10)		
Constant type:	2% (2)		
Constant rheme:	0% (0)		

With regard to non-participant themes, or breaks, there was a clear split: students thematised relatively few of the more marked options (e.g. interrogatives and annexes), while employing the less marked types (*it* and *there* predicates and bound clauses) as often as the newspapers do. *It* predicates, stereotypically a staple of university discourse, occurred five times more often (9%) in student writing than they did in The Sun and twice as often as in The Times, which means that students may be overdoing impersonality and formality. Not that they are wrong to employ these in academic writing; rather they are attempting to express these qualities through too few linguistic choices and arguably need to be taught to use a broader range of breaks with greater frequency.

Table 2
Occurrence of breaks (non-participant theme types).

	Students	The Sun	The Times
WH-interrogative:	0.6% (5)	4.5% (14)	1.7% (16)
Polar interrogative:	0.2% (2)	1.6% (5)	1.4% (13)
Verbal group:	0.6% (5)	5.1% (16)	4.3% (41)
IT predicate:	9% (70)	1.9% (6)	4.6% (43)
THERE predicate:	3% (26)	1% (3)	3.2% (30)
Bound clause:	5% (43)	3.2% (10)	5.5% (52)
Elided/Annex:	0.6% (5)	8% (25)	4.9% (46)

Particularly lacking in the essays, in comparison with newspaper text, were WH-interrogatives and annexes which, at 0.6% each, occurred far less often even than in the Times and only one eighth and one twelfth, respectively, as often as in the livelier Sun. Though teachers have in the past cautioned students against ever using annexes (generally known in EAP circles as 'sentence fragments') it could be argued that invariably writing in 'full-sentences' is not a recipe for the most readable prose. At least in courses such as InterComm, preparing students for journalism classes, annexes should now be accepted as a bona fide element of the genre. Of course, they are (as yet?) unacceptable in several other kinds of academic discourse.

With regard to the positioning of Daneš' progression types in the two newspapers, there is no obvious pattern as to where in a text they most often occur. As for breaks, on the other hand, there is a clear tendency for these to occur most often towards the end of a text, generally, and extensive correlation between the density of theme types and the signalling of problem-solution sections (Hoey,

1983). Allowing for a little simplification, Hoey's pattern essentially divides a text into four sections: Situation, Problem, Solution, and Evaluation, typically following in that order. Without going into great detail, the occurrence patterns of certain breaks stand out as significant, though more research would be necessary to authoritatively confirm or disconfirm this. For instance, The Sun employs an exceptionally high density of interrogatives in Problem, exclamatives in Evaluation, and a large number of verbal breaks in Solution, while The Times frequently uses bound clause breaks in Evaluation and *there* predicates in Solution. Overall, the picture is simple: breaks occur with particular frequency in Evaluation and, therefore, at the end of a text or paragraph. It is thus arguably the case that breaks are most useful of all for expressing opinions and changing the direction of the discourse.

6. Other thematic progression-related differences observable in student writing

One recurring difference in students' writing vis-à-vis newspapers (or, in this case, any academically acceptable written genre) is the former's seemingly random introduction of new elements in theme. In the following, each theme is separated from its rheme by a slash and the words in square brackets have been added for clarity:

Example 11. New material in theme and random use of breaks

> ***However, it*** **/ is actually hard to define the rights on the net** ***and sometimes those actions*** **/ hinder the process of democratization.** ***Take*** **/ China as an example.** ***There*** **/ was a famous event [which] happened in 1989 in China called "[the] 1989 Political Crisis".** ***The younger generation*** **/ barely kown [sic] the details of that event** ***because it*** **/ is a sensitive topic** ***and it*** **/ is only mentioned superficially in the history or political class.**

Example 11 is taken from a passage concerning the internet and democracy in China. It is notable for the abrupt introduction in theme of *the younger generation* (line 3), which has not previously been mentioned in any theme or rheme and cannot be derived from the text's hypertheme. Although it is perfectly justifiable to discuss generational differences in perceptions of events and the internet's role in these, the difficulty arises because, being thematised, *the younger generation* is presented as given. As a new aspect of the discussion, it should instead have been introduced in rheme after first preparing the ground for it in theme.

The same passage is also notable for its inappropriate use of three breaks (*it* and *there* predicates and a verbal theme) within the first four clauses. Breaks are best kept to the boundaries of ideational sequences generally, where they may usefully signal a change in the writer's thought process. If used in the middle of sequences, as in example 11, they are liable to confuse the reader by wrongly signalling such a change. This random choice of breaks, or non-participant theme types, as well as of new material creates a series of disjointed clauses with considerable loss of coherence. A second example comes from an excerpt on the internet's role in business, in which the structuring of given and new is in effect reversed:

Example 12. Inappropriate assignment to theme/rheme

> **Mohammad Nasim, the minister for post and telecommunication in Bangladesh, one of the poorest countries in the world, / saying, "*We* / know full well how important a role telecommunications play in a country's economic development." (Zaman, 1999).** ***The converse*** **/ is also making sense.** ***Lacking of information*** **/ is a disaster for a company** ***because it*** **/ cannot compete in the global marketplace.** ***Therefore, the instrument for access to the marketplace*** **/ is Internet.**

All the ideas expressed are both logical and relevant, yet poor thematisation in at least three cases makes this passage difficult to process. A viable interpretation of *The converse* would be extremely hard to discern unless the reader is confident and interested enough to simply continue to the subsequent clause. There the theme *Lacking of information* reveals that the writer sees the citation from Minister Nasim as implying that business relies on information. Only then do we understand that by *converse* s/he means where information is not forthcoming due to an absence of telecommunications networks. Even then, the final theme *Therefore, the instrument for access to the marketplace* is not immediately understandable. This excerpt employs cataphoric reference where anaphoric reference is required. It is a clear example of the student unwittingly being over-demanding on the reader by allowing her/his ideational meaning to race ahead of the textual meaning as manifested through progression.

Another oddity in student essays is that even an extensive use of constant progression does not necessarily ensure a coherent anchoring of the topic:

Example 13. Poor coherence in spite of constant progression sequences

> ***In addition, the internet*** **/ magnifies the range and influence of the criminal activities.** ***Consequently, the internet*** **/ also turns into the new task of world's security.** ***How to bring the all positive factors of internet into play*** **/ is foremost mission for every country.** ***With the growing number of information sources of the Internet, it*** **/ affects almost every aspect of our daily lives day by day.**

Despite the fact that every theme in example 13 includes the word 'internet', there is no clear development pattern for the reader to hold on to as s/he navigates the text. The relationship of themes to their rhemes (i.e. progression proper) is also vital. As Thompson explains: 'co-operative speakers select something [in theme, as the starting point for a clause] which will make it easier for their hearers to "hook" this clause on to the earlier clauses, to see immediately how the information that will come in the remainder of the clause is likely to fit in with what has already been said' (2004:142). Thompson's explanation relates in this instance to spoken discourse but is equally applicable to written text.

Another interesting finding from student essays was that they sometimes produce what might be termed *linear rheme* progression. Instead of linking the rheme of one clause to the theme of the next, linear rheme progression connects adjacent clauses through their respective rhemes, by-passing the themes but without creating constant rheme progression because one rheme is merely derived from the other, rather than actually repeating it. An example, below, links two clauses through the notion of democratisation via the internet, found in each rheme:

Example 14. Linear rheme (?) progression

> ***Basically speaking, Internet*** **/ can accelerate the process of democratization.** ***Research by Michael L. Best and Keegan W.*** Wade (2005) **/ shows that "a 25% increase in Internet penetration links to a one point jump on the 14 point Freedom**

House democracy index while still accounting for regional and socio-economic development".

A further variant on this might be termed *derived linear* progression, since it employs the same elements as Daneš' simple linear progression, but does so only indirectly, with a tenuous link that is insufficient for the progression to be clear to the reader. In other words, there is a linear progression but it only becomes clear thanks to the fact that the theme is simultaneously derived from the text's hypertheme, i.e. it is a hybrid of derived progression and simple linear progression. An example is:

Example 15. Derived linear (?) progression

***Before Internet came into being the potential market one can reach* / is quite restricted by geographic area *and the business competitors* / are those in local area (cited online in *What Is E-commerce and What Are Its Advantages*). *However, situation* / has changed …**

7. Conclusion

This article has suggested that we teach at least the rudiments of thematic progression if students are to truly gain control of their essay structure and obtain an overview of the choices available for argumentation, particularly where they are non-native speakers and, most especially, where their L1 has a radically different information structuring pattern from English, e.g. as in Chinese. While our InterComm students had received coaching in text structure and, indeed, were found to broadly employ Daneš' thematic progression types in line with Sun and Times journalism, their essays nevertheless revealed lacunae that seem to call for specific instruction in the basics of progression theory.

With texts from these two subgenres, tabloid and broadsheet, journalism and media studies students should become familiar with the range considered mainstream and develop an instinct for what is beyond it, whether excessively formal or outspoken. The greatest possible learner empowerment would be achieved if students could acquire the skill of balancing academic exposition with other more hortatory options by choosing appropriately from among a selection of progression types they have mastered. Of course, newspaper norms may be inappropriate as guidelines for other academic writing students, such as those studying medicine or engineering.

Problems with thematic progression, on the other hand, may well plague students in all sorts of disciplines – first and foremost, one would suspect, those at a lower level and those who do not read in English except in school or university courses. It would be useful if further studies in all areas of ESP could confirm or disconfirm this notion. If confirmed, it might be worth considering either a) adding a module on information structure to language courses where appropriate (students generally should be made more aware of the needs of their readers and of the importance to the reader of extended text coherence as opposed to merely local cohesion in any case), or b) teaching at least selected elements of functional grammar – those which research pinpoints as problem areas - alongside traditional sentence grammar.

In addition to some simplified theory, students should receive practice in evaluating the most suitable theme-rheme structure for a clause to follow given clauses, according to specific rhetorical aims. Hence, simple linear progression should in any case be used more liberally for increased cohesion and to ensure a sense of logical construction. In a long essay, and particularly where its argumentation is difficult to follow, the writer should employ more derived progression to reassure the reader that the topic remains the same and is being further developed.

Going by the findings mentioned above, students also need to be able to recognise which progression types make an argument more or less explicit and which make it more or less forceful. This is where familiarity with the proposed additions to Daneš' progression types could be useful. Whereas a density of Daneš' constant progression may strike the reader as demagogic, this effect may be mitigated by instead employing constant *gap* progression or constant *type* progression. Alternatively, it may be reinforced by a choice of constant rheme progression, perhaps the most forceful device of all and reminiscent of Mark Anthony's oratory, repeating "[Brutus] is an honourable man" in Julius Caesar.

If students need to refine their use of constant progression to master a range of forcefulness, they require familiarity with breaks, or non-participant theme progressions, even more urgently, in order to enliven their prose but also to indicate to the reader more clearly where subtopics begin and end, or where the discourse changes direction. From least to most marked, from bound clauses, *there* and *it* predicate themes as academic-sounding but otherwise insipid progression headers, to WH-interrogatives, annexes and exclamatives, which can make the reader sit up with a start, they need to be able to employ the full range of possibilities as appropriate.

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