

A Syntactic Approach to the Analysis of Information Flow in English Short Stories

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منهج نحوي لتحليل انسيابية المعلومات في القصص الانكليزية القصيرة

المدرس المساعد

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Abstract:-

A prerequisite for a better understanding of any discourse is performing a correct and accurate analysis of its structure. Also, such an analysis is needed for assembling the meaning of not only the simple straightforward discourse structures but also the ones that are fragmented such as in a story or an elaborate description based on the meanings of the utterances constituting that fragment. Making such analysis a must is also justified by the need for assigning a correct semantic interpretation to clauses constituting a discourse.

Therefore, this paper attempts to tackle one of the methods for analyzing a discourse structure. Following Erteschik-shir and Lappin (1979), this work tackles the issue of topic and dominance assignment in complicated discourse structures such as narratives. In this kind of genre, discourse occurs as a chain of structures leading to a complicated structure that needs a clear syntactic model for an accurate analysis. The model presented by Danes (1974) regarding the assignment of the type of theme and rheme chaining in a discourse is adopted as those two concepts are quite similar to the concepts under investigation in this work, topic and dominance. The researcher concludes that in storytelling different techniques of chaining are used with different frequencies based on the function underlying each text leading to different information distribution.

Key words: chaining, theme and rheme, dominance, discourse.

المخلص:-

من الأمور الأساسية للحصول على فهم معمق لأي خطاب هو تحليل التركيب بشكل صحيح ودقيق. هكذا تحليل يعتبر من الأساسيات لتحليل النصوص البسيطة والواضحة وكذلك النصوص المركبة وذات التركيب المشظي كما هو الحال في بعض الحوارات في القصص. وهكذا تحليل أساسي للوصول إلى تفسير صائب ودقيق لمعاني النص القصصي. ولهذا عمد الباحث بهذا العمل إلى تناول أحد المناهج التحليلية المتبعة بتحليل تركيب الخطاب. يتبنى هذا البحث منهج ايرتشيك شير ولابين (1979) لتحليل طريقة تعيين المبتدأ والخبر في التركيب المعقد للخطاب مثل تركيب الخطاب القصصي. الخطاب في هذا النوع من الكتابات يظهر كسلسلة معقدة من التراكمات اللغوية التي تحتاج إلى نموذج تحليلي للوصول إلى تحليل دقيق لها. لذلك يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل القصة الانكليزية متبعاً المنهج التحليلي الذي طرحه دينز (1974) الذي يحدد نوع الترابط بين المبتدأ والخبر في النص الخطابي. وخلص البحث إلى وجود عدة تقنيات متبعة بكتابة القصة لربط المبتدأ والخبر بالنص الخطابي بشكل سلسلة تمتد إلى نص خطابي كامل وليس فقط على مستوى الجملة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: سلسلة، مبتدأ وخبر، نص خطابي.

1. Introduction

Topic and dominance, the main focus of this work, are "functional notions assigned to constituents of sentences". These are two notions that are based on the theme-rheme concept first introduced within the Prague Linguistic Circle (PLC) in their theory of functional sentence perspective (FSP). Based on Reinhart (1981, p.53), topic is defined as "the idea of pragmatic aboutness, it is what the sentence is about in a given context". The topic is expressed on the surface structure by a syntactic constituent, while dominance is a function that is assigned to a certain constituent based on the choice of the speaker as to which constituent is intended to be the focus of the recipient. To make the concepts under scrutiny more obvious, it is necessary to go through them in detail.

1.1 Topic

In order to deeply understand the notion of topic it is necessary to look back at its historical development as part of the notion of information structure. The idea of analysing linguistic units on the grounds of their semantic components, i.e. their information structure of the meaning that may be conveyed through the use of language can be traced back to the nineteenth century when Henri Weil, a French philologist, published his work on clausal structure in 1844. He was the first to discuss that discourse structure can influence the sentence internal structure (Wang, 2007). Later, the German linguists von der Gabelentz (1868) and Paul (1880) used the terms "psychological subject" and "predicate" (or topic and comment) respectively.

Weil's ideas inspired the concept of theme-rheme presented by Mathesius (1939) and the subsequent Prague school theory of word order. Others suggested different names for these two concepts, such as Bates (1976) who suggested topic-comment and Erteschik-shir (1988) suggesting topic-dominance.

The interrelated notions of topic or theme are central notions in the topic of information structure in the seminal work of the Prague School in the 1930s. The basic idea of each term is that "topic or theme indicate what a given statement is about and focus or rheme represent what is predicated about the topic" (Horn and Ward, 2008).

The **topic** or **theme** as it is named in FSP was first defined by Mathesius (1939) as "that is being spoken about in a sentence" (cited in Bloor,1991). The definition presented by Reinhart (1981), viewing the topic as "what the proposition expressed by a sentence is pragmatically about", is consistent with the FSP notion of the topic.

The meaning of the phrase "what the proposition is pragmatically about is further explained by Reinhart (1981):

"To say that a sentence S uttered in a context C is about α , i.e., is to say, first, that, if possible, the proposition \emptyset expressed in S will be assessed by the hearer in C with respect to the subset of propositions already listed in the context set under α , and second, that if \emptyset is not rejected it will be added to the context set under the entry of α ".

Erteschik-Shir (1988) illustrates what is meant by this definition by stating that "if it is assumed that a context set is built by an ongoing discourse, the propositions accepted into that context set are classified and stored under certain defining entries". The sentence topic determines the entry for assessing and storing the proposition in which it occurs. For example:

(1) Lilly is a cute girl.

the proposition in this sentence is assessed under the entry "Lilly" and stored within that entry. In Reinhart's sense, this is what it means for a sentence to have a topic. However, it is possible to assess "a cute girl" as a topic but in a different context:

(2) S1: Who is a cute girl?

S2: Lilly is a cute girl.

Here the proposition of this sentence is assessed under the entry of "cute girl" which is obviously the topic of the sentence. This follows that sentences may have several topics, but only one is actualized, in a certain context.

We may use a number of topic-tests of sentences for identifying "the constituents of a sentence" which are possible topics based on the definition of topic as "what the sentence is about". The constituent being tested should be substituted for X in one of the following sentence frames below: (note: "S stands for the sentence in which X occurs")

(3) As for x , [s . . . x . . .

Concerning x , [s . . . x . . .

Speaking of x , [s . . . x . . .

(4) He said about X that [s . . . X . . .

He said of X that [s . . . X . . .

For example, if it is intended to determine what the potential topics of the sentence "*The boy submitted his paper to the teacher*" we can test it in the frame of test (3) as in:

(5) As for the *boy*, he submitted his paper to the teacher.

As for *the Paper*, the boy submitted it to the teacher.

As for *the teacher*, the boy submitted the paper to him.

These tests are useful but they leave the matter of topic identification of a certain sentence in a certain context an open question and more than one constituent is a potential topic. This means that we need more than this step for topic identification.

1.2 Dominance

The notion of dominance is similar to the notion of **rheme** presented by the Prague school members, specifically, Mathesius who defines the rheme as "what the speaker says about the theme". Later, Firbas (1964), also a member of the Prague school, develops this distinction by introducing his Idea of Communicative Dynamism:

"By the degree of communicative dynamism (CD) carried by a sentence element we understand the extent to which the sentence element contributes to the development of the communication, to which it 'pushes the communication forward,' as it were" (Firbas, p.136).

Here, the topic in a sentence carries the lowest amount of CD, while the rheme is the one which carries the highest degree of CD. As for the term "rheme", the term dominance is used instead in this work because it is precisely defined and syntactically testable.

The notion of dominance was first introduced in Erteschik-shir (1973) but it was not defined there. Instead, Erteschik-shir (1979,1988), defined dominance as a term that refers to what is

being said about the topic. In other words, dominance entails the constituent that the producer wants to draw the attention of the recipient to. Another definition of dominance is presented in Erteschik-shir and Lappin as:

DOM: A constituent C of a sentence S is dominant in S if and only if the speaker intends to direct the attention of his hearers to the intension of c, by uttering S (1979:43).

Meaning that a constituent is dominant in a sentence S when a speaker intends to draw attention to its semantic content by uttering S.

Erteschik-shir (1988) points out that defining dominance in terms of "the speaker intention" makes it a pragmatic property assigned to a constituent in a specific context in a discourse. The notion of dominance suggested by Erteschik relates discourse phenomena to extraction phenomena within the sentence (Poany and Scha, 1984).

Erteschik-shir and Lappin (1979) differentiate dominance from the other uses of similar terms. For instance, the term "focus" used by Chomsky (1970) correspond to the notion of "dominance". The focus, according to Chomsky, is "any phrase containing the intonation center or nuclear stress of a sentence". Unlike dominance, focus is related to stress assignment and it is not a pragmatic property.

Another related yet different concept is that concerning the notion of new and old information suggested by Chafe (1974). Erteschik-shir and Lapin (1979) believe that the difference between those two terms looks very similar to the difference between the dominant and non-dominant constituents of a sentence. However, an item can be completely new yet it is not received as dominant, and an old one can be viewed as dominant. Meaning that the differentiation between new and old information is not a decisive criterion for deciding "dominnat-nondominant" items in a sentence.

As for the number of dominant constituents, each sentence can have only one dominant item in an ongoing discourse as the context can help choose the possible candidate and exclude others. Nevertheless, a sentence dealt with in isolation can have more than one possible dominant constituent. Erteschik-shir (1988) points out that most constituents have the possibility of being a dominant

constituent. Therefore, he suggests two types of procedures to test the potential dominance of sentential constituents, "a discourse substitution test" and "a syntactic extraction test". The following example shows that if a constituent tested for "dominance" can be denied (by the hearer), then the intention of the hearer was actually drawn to that specific constituent:

(6) Speaker A: Adam gave the professor the book.

Speaker B: That is not true, Jane gave the Professor the book.

That is not true, he gave the professor the paper.

*That is not true, he gave his friend the book.

This test indicates that in this context the subject "Jack" and the indirect object "the book" can be possible candidates for being dominant constituents, while the direct object "the professor" cannot. In other contexts one might contrast the professor with some other person, in this case the starred reply of **B** can be possible.

The second test is "an extraction test" developed by Erteschik-Shir and Lappin (1979). In this test, only potentially dominant constituents can be moved or extracted by transformations such as "wh-movement" in making questions or relativisation. The previous sentence can be tested as follows:

(7) Who handed the professor the book?

What did John give the professor?

*Who did John hand the book?

Here, the direct object is, also, revealed as not being potentially "dominant". This test is useful because it gives clearer results than the "lie-test" and poses interesting questions concerning the connection between "extractability and dominance-chaining".

1.3 Topic and Dominance Chaining

The basic idea here lies in the notion of connecting the clauses of the discourse unit together to give a sense of coherence and to show the contribution of each sentential unit to the greater unit to which they belong, i.e., the discourse. Also, it helps reveal the thematic

progression or the theme-rheme pattern followed in the use of language. Thematic progression is the flow of information between themes and rhemes in discourse that follows certain patterns that will be discussed later.

Topic chaining is a kind of thematic progression in which the topic of a sentence is identical to the topic of the previous sentence (Erteschik-shir,1988). For example, **My sister** is a doctor. **She** likes helping people. Both constituents in bold refer to the same person and the topic of the second sentence is identical to the topic of the first, so it is said that they are chained.

In any clause, other constituents besides the topic can be identified as possible dominant units, therefore, they may become the topic of the following clause or clauses depending on the type of chaining adopted. Such technique may be seen as an expansion on the previous clause before making a topic switch (Polany and Scha,1984). This is exemplified in subordination or relative clauses.

2. Research Methodology

2.1 Research design and Model of Analysis

This research adopts a qualitative method since it aims to analyse the ways texts in children story books are designed in terms of the patterns of information distribution followed to achieve coherence.

For analysing the chaining techniques employed in the target data, the study adopts Danes (1974) model for assigning such techniques and answering the questions of the study.

It became possible to see how a number of topics, selected from the network of "potential topics" in a sentence are actualised in discourse. There are three possible ways suggested by Danes (1974) adopted in this work. He suggested those ways in terms of the notions of "theme-rheme" which are closely similar to topic-dominance, the focus of this work.

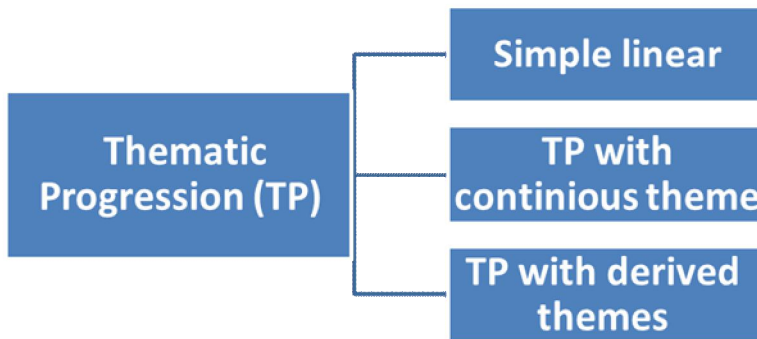
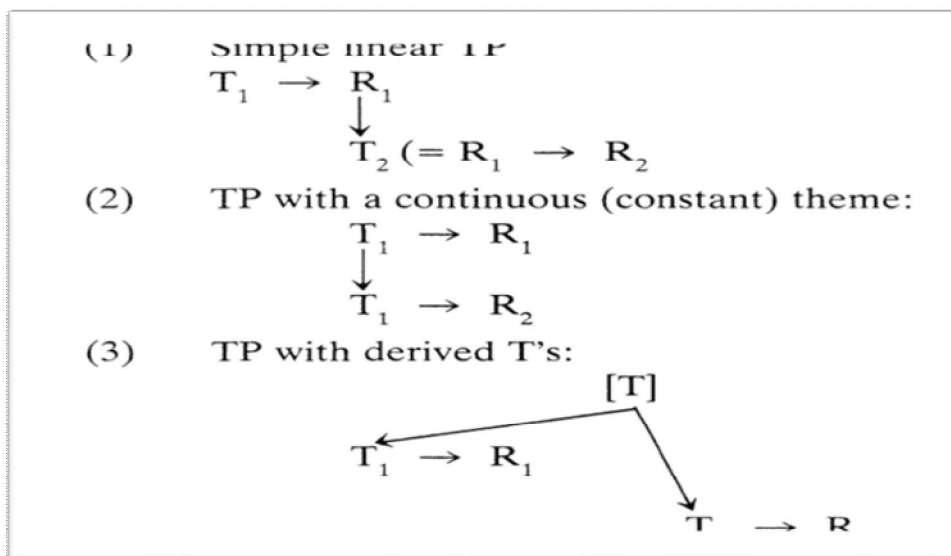


Figure 1: Types of Thematic Progression (Danes,1974)

The three types can be explained in more detail with a schematic account as shown below where TP stands for thematic progression, T stands for theme, and R stands for rheme:



The first one is similar to a case of having "dominance chaining" where the new topic (T_2) is the same dominant constituent of the previous sentence (R_1). The whole idea underlying this kind of chaining is that "for two sentences to cohere when the topic is changed, the new topic needs to be derived or extracted from the

dominant constituent in the preceding sentence". This can be illustrated in an example:

(8) The boy gave his teacher a book. It was a book of history.

Here the topic of the second sentence in (8) is extracted from the "dominant constituent" in the first sentence, "a book". And this is a clear case of dominance chaining in a discourse that helps reveal the coherence among the successive sentences.

The second type indicates that the topic remains the same across sentences in a discourse and this is the case when we are talking about something and continue talking about it. This is the case of topic chaining. This can be illustrated by an example:

(9) Jack entered the class. He handed the professor a book. He was happy to do so.

The third type can be a case of "topic chaining" or "dominance chaining". Erteschik-shir (1988) relates this type to what he calls "Restrictive Dominance". The notion of restrictive dominance occurs when "a set is specified either by conjunctive or disjunctive listing or when an element(s) is contrasted with the rest of the elements in a defined set", for instance:

(10) Speaker A: where did the boy go?

Speaker B: He went towards the church.

This question is being asked by A based on the assumption that B has a set of directions in his mind. After the set is defined in a certain discourse, any element of that set can be selected as "a restrictive dominant element". Dominance here is not related to the element being chosen, but rather the choice in "opposition" to the set of elements being defined, and this is a case of dominance chaining. Similarly, any element of the restrictive set can be chosen as a topic and we would have a case of topic chaining. If the restrictive set is defined by "a dominant constituent", we may say that we have a subcase of "dominance-chaining" and, Similarly, if the restrictive set is defined by a topic constituent, this would be a subcase of "topic chaining".

It is possible to represent these kinds of dominance-chaining and topic-chaining, respectively, with examples as follows:

(11) Speaker A: Tell me about your friends.

Speaker B: John is a teacher, David works in an office and Febe is a student. (dominance chaining)

(12) Speaker A: What do your friends do?

Speaker B: John is a teacher, David works in an office and Febe is a student. (topic chaining)

2.2 Research Data

In this paper, it is intended to analyse representative short story books. After reviewing several short stories, the researcher selected to probe into the work presented by Daniel Defoe *Robinson Crusoe* Published by Al-Maarif Publishing house in 2019.

2.3 Methods of Data Collection

For achieving the aims of this study, samples of the short story selected for analysis are extracted to be analysed based on the model chosen for this study. Before that, the researcher went through the whole story keeping in mind the different types of thematic progression as well as monitoring the flow of information within each paragraph and then taking a general view of such flow over the whole text. This was the first step, as for the second, the researcher wrote down notes concerning the flow of information whether it went swiftly across the clauses or not. The researcher intends by such a step to reveal, as a reader himself, the net of coherent ties that exist among clauses and the ease with which they can be sensed. A third step is to categorise the types of chaining used for achieving the thematic progression and revealing the mostly used type among the three identified types according to the adopted model.

2.4 Data Analysis

The story written by Daniel Defoe "Robinson Crusoe" is a kind of an imagined biography of the main character in the story "Crusoe" that the writer attempted to show as if Crusoe himself is narrating the incidents of his life. Hence, the main type of thematic progression used in this kind of story is the second type where the topic is almost

constant and is repeated across most of the clauses in the whole work.

The story starts with the early events that led Crusoe to make the choices in his life which eventually led him to make the voyage which had unfortunate ends for Crusoe.

Through inspecting the whole story, it is noticed that most of the clauses include the second type mentioned in Danes' model mentioned and explained above. For example, the story is initiated with the following clauses:

"I was born inMy father was German but he moved to Hull.....I had two older brothers....."

"My father spoke seriously to mehe told me that my life would be pleasant with them".

It is obvious in those clauses that the topic is the same which is the main character himself and his father. The same topic is repeated. So this is a type of topic chaining. The other types of chaining are also included especially within the first part where Crusoe was talking about his family and his close friend who we learn later was the reason for him make the voyage. For example:

"in London, I became friends with the captain...he had been to Guinea"

In the second clause the dominance of the previous clause is used as a topic for the next. This is a clear case of dominance chaining which is the first type mentioned in Danes model mentioned above.

In the following parts, as the main character was the lone survivor of a storm, most of the clauses are an example of topic chaining as he was saying what he felt and how he managed to survive in a deserted island except for some clauses where Crusoe described the island and the weather, for instance:

"the waves battered us and I was worried that they were going to split the boat in two"

Here the chaining is made through the dominant part and this the case of the first type of chaining, dominance chaining. But throughout the last part, where Crusoe was completely alone on the island, the

type of chaining mostly employed is topic chaining where the focus is on Crusoe and how he prepared for the new way of living.

3. Results and Discussion

It is noticed that all types of chaining are used in presenting the events of the story but with different distribution. The basic reason is that each type performs the same function but for different reasons. The first type is used when the writer attempts to expand on the dominance because it receives most of the focus and this can show a kind of elaboration of the events and environments of the story.

In other cases where the function intended for the text is a kind of a list or description, the topic chaining part is most suitable as it repeats the same topic being described.

As a result, the coherence in the story and the flow of information is achieved through using the three types of chaining choosing the most suitable for the intended function of the text.

It is also noticed that the most frequent type of chaining technique used is the second type where the concentration is repeatedly given to the topic as it is a kind of biography where someone is talking about incidents that took place in life at some point in time.

Throughout the whole story, the three types are well employed and the writer performed a skillful development of the constituents of the text. The thematic progression is well maintained and there is a proper progress of the information flow.

4. Conclusions

In telling a story, it is important to take into consideration the type of story being told. This can have a great consequence on the type of chaining and way the thematic progression is performed. In the different types of storytelling, there is always a type that functions better than the other types in most of the parts of the story. Being able to employ the different types of the thematic progression techniques can lead to a skillful presentation of the related events as well as a perfect information flow that leads the reader in an obvious way as the story is read, avoiding leaving the reader confused or feeling that there is something wrong with the logical ties of the

clauses that help build perfectly connected images in the mind of the reader.

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