

# Thematic Structures of News Reports on the Coronavirus

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**Abstract:** Theme works together within a text to achieve coherence and it is a key terminology in written discourse analysis. Based on Halliday's theories on the theme structures, the primary purpose of this paper is to explore the thematic structures of 13 news reports on the coronavirus abstracted from China daily. With combination of the quantitative and qualitative analysis, the results present that the distribution of simple themes are more frequent than the application of multiple themes and among simple themes nominal groups are most commonly adopted in clauses of the reports. Additionally, other thematic structures including adverbial groups, prepositional phrases, thematic equatives, thematised comments and existential *there* are also distributed in these news reports. It is of great value for readers to comprehend the written styles and the writer's evaluation.

## 1. Introduction

Reading news reports is an essential way to obtain information in the daily basis. And the role of each utterance part in articles is evaluated for its semantic contribution to the whole discourse. Cohesion and coherence are indispensable elements in discourse analysis. While theme and rheme are two terms which concern the patterns of information flow in sentences and the relations of the patterns to the text coherence.

Scholars have been studying the theme a lot over the past years. While the author will focus on the thematic structures in detail as themes work together within a text to achieve coherence and have the functions of signaling the maintenance or progression of what the text is about at that point, which is vital to readers' mastery of the messages.

The paper devotes great attention to 13 news reports on the coronavirus, which are abstracted from *China Daily*. The primary purpose of the research is to find out the application characteristics and the frequency of thematic structures in the reports by the combination of qualitative and quantitative methods, thereby, helping readers grasp the language features of the reports on the coronavirus and promoting effective reading.

## 2. Theme

The Prague school defines theme as a point of departure of a sentence. Following the terminology of the Prague school of linguists, Halliday (1994) believes that the theme, generally, can be identified as element which comes in first position in the clause, and theme is the starting point for the message and the ground which the clause is taking off. [1]

## 3. Classification of Theme

According to Halliday, theme can be classified into the simple theme and the multiple theme. Simple theme is a simply the label that we used to suggest that meaning is attached to in the clause, where the utterance comes from. While sometimes there might be more than a single structure in this position, then there are multiple themes in the clause.

## 4. Application of Theme in News Reports on Coronavirus

13 reports on the coronavirus are chosen as the research target. After picking up clauses and separating theme and rheme of each clause, the author analyses the application of thematic structures.

#### 4.1. Simple Theme

When the theme of a clause consists of only one structural element, and that element is represented by only one unit shown by one nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase, it is called a simple theme. [2] Though calculation, it is found that simple themes are applied more frequently than multiple themes. Specifically, the application of simple themes in the news report on the coronavirus are as follow.

**Table 1.** Distribution of simple themes

News reports	one nominal group	adverbial group	prepositional phrase
report 1	21	2	1
report 2	20	1	2
report 3	74	3	25
report 4	52	2	5
report 5	48	2	6
report 6	27	1	2
report 7	27	0	4
report 8	26	2	2
report 9	36	3	9
report 10	23	2	1
report 11	44	2	19
report 11	44	2	19
report 12	20	1	2
report 13	18	1	3

Through the statistics of the articles, it is clearly seen from the table that nominal group and prepositional phrase are more frequently employed in 13 new reports than the adverbial group. Among three types of simple themes, one nominal group are the most common one. And a typical character of the reports is that most themes of clauses are persons and usually the clauses led by the person are long clauses. For instance, *The 31-year-old doctor said she has witnessed how people of that generation have put themselves forward when they have been needed during the epidemic.* The 31-year-old doctor is just one element in the clause and constitutes a simple theme. Besides the person, there are few nouns or noun phrases used as simple themes, such as *epidemic response* in the clause *Epidemic response was on the agenda in a series of Party leadership meetings Xi presided over since early January.* As for the prepositional phrases, the cases are *In the letter Xi extended sincere greetings to them and all young people fighting on the front line of epidemic control.* and *Among the over 42,000 medical workers who went to assist in epidemic control in Hubei.* In two clauses, the themes are prepositional phrases covering *in the letter* and *among the over 42,000 medical workers* respectively. Adverbial groups are less frequently distributed. For example, in the clause *now we're capable of shouldering social responsibilities and making contributions to the country with our own efforts* the lexicon *now* appears at the beginning to indicate the theme, the starting point of the utterance.

However, in some cases the theme contains two or more groups or phrases and function as a single structural element. Such a group or phrase complex is also known as a simple theme. *Xi, who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission.* In this comparatively complex clause, Xi is followed by the identity explanation *who is also general secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee and chairman of the Central Military Commission* and the two groups compose a single structure component to form the theme of this clause.

## 4.2. Conjunctions as Multiple Theme

Sometimes there are more than a single structure in the theme position instead, the topical theme can be with anything else before it comes. In this case, we have multiple themes such as conjunctions *and*, *but* and *as*, etc. (Halliday, 1994) [3] The author takes the frequency of conjunctions as part of theme as an example in the following.

**Table 2.** Distribution of the conjunction as a part of theme

Conjunctions as part of theme	and	48
	but	12
	if	1
	after	5

From the table above, it is obvious that the data of conjunctions listed as part of theme are not so frequent as the number of simple themes. In the usage of multiple themes, the conjunction *and* accounts for the first place. The discourse markers of condition and time are rarely selected. And other commonly indicators of reason-result such as *so* and *because* are not found in the chosen reports although they are often adopted in the written texts in other styles of reading materials. The examples of the word *and* as a part of theme is *and it is trying its best to limit the impact of the disease as much as possible* and *and informed the World Health Organization as well as relevant countries and regions about the disease in a timely manner*. All the usage of *and* is expressed after a comma and there is not anyone which is at the beginning of the sentence, revealing a difference between the language characteristics of news reports and the ordinary description. While cases in the adoption of *but* with different positions in clauses are *But the prevention and control work remains arduous.* and *but it wasn't added to the newly confirmed cases that day*. The functional word *but* is a signal that the coming clause forms part of a larger structural unit, the clause complex. No matter which conjunctions are put to use, they lead shorter clauses than the clauses led by simple themes.

## 4.3. Other Thematising Structures

In addition to the group or phrase complex functions as a single element, two or more separate elements can act as a single element, occasionally presented in these 13 news reports, which are said to be a single theme. For example, *what Xi commands is a people's war against the epidemic* in this clause, theme is what Xi commands, which is equal to rheme. Such structure is known as a thematic equative.

Another structure is thematised comment, in which it is a place-holder for the subject of *be*. [4] As is written in the clause *It is indeed encouraging that the number of new cases being reported from China has been decreasing* the theme is *it is indeed encouraging* and the real subject is from the number to decreasing.

Existential there in there-be structure, the departure point of the clause, can be as the theme. A case is *there were 52,526 confirmed cases on the Chinese mainland*. *There were* is the theme, indicating the process to express experiential meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

Theme specifies and changes the framework for interpretation of the following clause or clauses and signals the boundaries of sections in the text, thus, it is closely related to cohesion and coherence. The study on thematic structures of news reports on the coronavirus helps readers identify what the writer conveys or thinks is and thereby improve their reading in an effective. Furthermore, teachers' emphasis on the language features of news reports on the coronavirus promotes students' mastering the given information and the new information when they read newspaper relevant to the similar topics. Besides when reading passages of textbooks or other reading materials, identifying the theme structure is also of importance.

## References

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