

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

Thematic Analysis in English Translation of Chinese Narratives

Liang Cui¹, Wenjuan Ma²

¹Lecturer and MA supervisor, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

*Email: 2861686766@qq.com

²MA Candidate, School of Foreign Languages, North China Electric Power University, Beijing, China.

DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.13.3.1](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.13.3.1)



Article info

Article Received: 10/06/2025
Article Accepted: 28/06/2025
Published online: 07/07/2025

Abstract

Thematic structure is one of the discourse function forms, playing a crucial role in conveying language information, influencing the understanding of the original text and the construction of the translated text. This article conducts a contrastive study on the thematic structures of Chinese narrative novels and their English translations, based on the similarities and differences in thematic structures between Chinese and English texts. It is found that translators should try to preserve the thematic structure of the original text as much as possible while translating, but due to the differences between English and Chinese texts, translators could make certain adjustments to the thematic structure of the original text while ensuring the equivalence of meaning and readability of the translation.

Keywords: Thematic Structure; Narratives; Translation; Literary translation.

1. Overview

Translation is not only the conversion between different languages, but also the exchange of different cultures. Excellent translation faithfully reproduces the content of the original text, and reconstructs of the original style and the display of cultural connotations in the translation. The translation of novels is done sentence by sentence, but the translation is not a superposition of individual sentences. It is necessary to consider whether the information flow is smooth when the sentences are

connected at the beginning and end, and whether the chosen themes in the translation reflect the intention of the original author. Thus, choosing different information development structures will directly affect the fidelity, fluency, and coherence of the translation when translating with the same conceptual meaning.

To Live and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* are both long fictional novels created by contemporary Chinese author Yu Hua. Through these two characters: Fu Gui and Xu Sanguan, the author vividly depicts the zeitgeist of society

and the fate of ordinary people. These two novels, with their calm strokes, showcase the meaning of life and the value of existence, revealing the helplessness of fate and the unpredictability of life. With their unique narrative style and profound themes, they have become classic works of Chinese literature. This article selects the content of each chapter in the novels *To Live* and *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* as the research object.

Firstly, based on Halliday's theory of thematic analysis, the selected Chinese chapter content and its English translation discourse are subjected to thematic analysis. Then, through contrastive analysis of thematic structures, the changes in thematic structures between English and Chinese texts during the translation process are compared. By comparing and analyzing the changes in the thematic structure, the thematic structures is classified, which have been changed during the translation process. Finally, the reasons for the changes is analyzed in thematic structure during the translation process, revealing the possible factors that affect the changes, and providing constructive suggestions for literary translation.

2. Thematic Structure

2.1 Theme and Rheme

Mathesius, the founder of the Prague School, firstly proposed the concepts of theme and rheme in his book *Functional Sentence Perspective*. He refers to the component at the beginning of a sentence that serves to introduce a topic in communication as the theme, expressing known information, while the other components are called the rheme, expressing new or unknown information. These two concepts help study the role of different components in sentences during language communication.

The Prague school believes that the theme is the topic of a sentence or the object of its narrative, while Halliday holds that the conceptual meaning of theme is broader than the topical meaning, so that the theme should

include the topic as well as other components located at the beginning of the sentence that do not represent the topic. It is based on this viewpoint that the System-Functional school, represented by Halliday, uses its terminology--- theme and rheme, to explain the discourse meaning of English. Halliday (2000) provided a detailed description and in-depth exploration of the thematic structure, defining and dividing themes from a functional perspective. He perceives that the theme is the starting point of information and the object that the clause aims to convey. Unlike the subject in traditional grammar, he deems that the theme is not necessarily old information, but rather the starting point of the entire sentence and the central topic of the clause, which is the starting point of communication. The remaining part following the theme is the rheme, which is a description and explanation of the theme.

From the perspective of the three meta-functions of language, Halliday divides themes into textual themes, interpersonal themes, and ideational themes, while distinguishing between single themes, multiple themes, and clause as themes. The difference between a single theme and a mutiple theme is that the former lacks internal structure and cannot be further analyzed, while the latter has internal structure and can be further divided into textual theme, interpersonal theme, and topic theme. In multiple themes, the ideational theme is usually located at the end, and each sentence must have at least one ideational theme. And the clause as theme refers to the entire sentence acts as the theme position. The theme is the center of a clause, and the corresponding rheme is used to further illustrate the theme. Generally speaking, in the linear arrangement of sentences, the theme is always placed first and the rheme is placed last. In terms of information distribution, the theme is often known information, while the rheme is mostly new information (Baker, 2000:122).

The theme in the analysis of thematic structure in this article refers to the part located

at the beginning of the sentence as the starting point of discourse information.

2.2 Contrast of Theme Structures between English and Chinese

Chinese is a paratactic language that emphasizes topics in language, and the thematic structures are usually "topic + explanation". English, on the contrast, is a hypotactic language that emphasizes the subject, and the thematic structure is usually "theme + rheme". English and Chinese have both similarities and differences, manifested as:

2.2.1 Declarative Sentence

Comparing English and Chinese clauses, the main syntactic components in English and Chinese declarative sentences can all be noun phrases, adverbial phrases, and prepositional phrases, for example:

- (1) The station-master spoke to Mrs. Medlock in a rough good-natured way.
- (2) Presently there seemed to be no more hedges and no more trees.
- (3) At last, the horses began to go more slowly, as if they were climbing uphill.
- (4) 她是在宽慰我。
- (5) 那时我正在我爹坟前。
- (6) 为了通过考试他这几天学习很认真。

From the above examples, we can see that there is a certain similarity in the syntactic components of English and Chinese themes. However, the difference lies in that in Chinese, verbs, adjective phrases, and postpositional structures are often used as the theme component, while in English, "it" is often used as the formal subject and "there" is often an empty subject. For example:

- (7) 有活干心里踏实。
- (8) 美是人人爱。
- (9) 桌子上有几本书。
- (10) There are some tables in the room.

- (11) It is necessary that we start off at once.

2.2.2 Interrogative Sentence

Interrogative sentences are divided into general questions and special questions. In English, general questions are often constructed by changing the subject verb order of the declarative sentence, with the subject verb or linking verb serving as the theme. In special questions, the special interrogative word WH-element is used to indicate information gaps. In Chinese, the absence of a finite verb leads to a lack of word order changes between the finite verb and the subject. The theme of a general question is often taken by the subject or "是不是" of the sentence, while a special question is usually asked in declarative sentence order. For example:

- (12) Is that your new bag?
- (13) Why do you want to get it?
- (14) 他病好了吗?
- (15) 你为什么不去看望他?

2.2.3 Imperative Sentences

Imperative sentences indicate command and requests, etc. English imperative sentences are divided into affirmative imperative sentences and negative imperative sentences. In affirmative imperative sentences, the theme of subject-less imperative sentences is the verb before the sentence; the theme of imperative sentences with a subject is the grammatical subject; the theme of imperative sentences with "let's" is "let us or let's", and the theme of imperative sentences with "do" is usually the zero theme and "do" together to form a bipartite theme. In negative imperative sentences, the theme of imperative sentences with "don't" is composed of "don't + grammatical theme" or "don't + zero theme".

- (16) Read after me.
- (17) You stop talking!
- (18) Let's/ let us go to school.

(19) Do your best.

(20) Don' t follow me.

(21) Don' t you shout out me!

The construction of imperative sentences in Chinese is the same as that in English.

(22) 保持安静 !

(23) 你保持安静 !

(24) 让我们讨论一下这个问题。

(25) 别忘了关灯。

2.2.4 Exclamations

The composition of English exclamatory sentences is the same as that of special interrogative sentences, consisting of "what + noun. /how + adj./adv." or adding an exclamation mark at the end of a declarative sentence.

(26) What a fool that the man is!

(27) How beautiful you are!

(28) The book is so interesting!

The composition of Chinese exclamatory sentences is similar to declarative sentences, with an exclamation mark added at the end of the sentence.

(29) 你可真傻 !

(30) 多漂亮的女孩儿 !

(31) 真是一个好消息 !

2.2.5 Textual Function of Themes

In terms of providing background information, English and Chinese share commonalities. Both English and Chinese themes carry old information and provide some foundational background information for subsequent plots, such as:

(32) As far as I know, he is a good manager.

(33) 就我所知, 他是个好经理。

In terms of consistency in text content, the connection of the text is carried out in the

order of known to unknown, and most of the thematic parts in both English and Chinese languages are consistent with the previous text. For example,

(34) She invited me to her birthday party. It was held in a big hall.

(35) 旁边的年轻人又喊又叫, 他们的兴奋是他们处在局外人的位置上。

However, the differences in discourse between Chinese and English are reflected in the arrangement, word order, and frequency of main themes.

(36) I had a special affection for that bitter tea that farmers brew. There would always be a bucket of just that kind of tea under a tree by the ridge between the fields, and without a second thought I would ladle out enough to fill my tea-stained bowl. Once I'd filled it to the brim, I'd start bullshitting with some of the male workers. The girls would whisper among themselves and then stifle their chuckles as I'd swagger off.

(37) 我喜欢喝农民那种带有苦味的茶水, 他们的茶桶就放在田埂的树下, 我毫无顾忌地拿起漆满茶垢的茶碗舀水喝, 还把自己的水壶灌满, 与田里干活的男人说上几句废话, 在姑娘因我而起的窃窃私笑里扬长而去。

From the comparison of the above two parts, it can be found that there are significant differences in the selection of topics between Chinese and English texts.

The theme in Chinese is expressed through time, while in English, pronouns are mainly used as the theme. In the above two examples, in the Chinese text, "我" as the theme only appears twice. The entire paragraph is dedicated to describing a series of actions of "我", leaving more space for new information to stand out, and highlighting the chronological order and a series of activities of "我". This arrangement ensures the development of information from old to new, making information transmission more efficient. The information value carried by the theme is

greater, which is conducive to the development of Chinese discourse.

In English discourse, the theme is often the protagonist of the entire event, and each clause has its own independent theme. Similarly, information transmission also goes from old to new, but the information value carried by the theme is not as high as in Chinese, and the role of the theme in the development of the discourse is limited.

The above examples may have certain limitations, but after contrast, there are indeed differences in the order and frequency of the themes in Chinese and English texts.

3. Contrastive analysis

In the analysis of the thematic structure of selected novel passages, the changes in the thematic components of each discourse during the translation process are statistically analyzed based on three elements: (1) The total number of sentences in the original text; (2) The number of sentences that retain the main and positional structure of the original sentence; (3) The number of sentences with changes in the thematic structure. Meanwhile, based on statistics, the changes in the thematic structure of the selected two novel chapters were classified and analyzed in detail.

3.1 Theme Structure in First-Person Narratives

The selected content of this article is the second chapter of the novel *To Live* and its English translation. The statistical changes in the thematic structure of its translation are as follows:

The number of sentences in original text	194
The number of sentences with unchanged thematic structure	82
The number of sentences with changed	112

thematic structure	
--------------------	--

By contrasting and analyzing the thematic structures of the original and translated texts narrated from a first-person perspective, it is found that the majority of sentences in the chapters have changed their thematic structures, which can be classified into eight categories:

Add time adverbials or other conjunctions	43
Prepose adjective phrases/adverb phrases/prepositions	29
Conversion by "There be"	2
Change of organizational order	8
Dependency conversion	6
Translation by "It"	10
Overall translation --- partial translation	4
postposing initiator, highlight the main content	10

(1) When translating the original text into English, sometimes in order to make the narrative order of the translation more coherent, the translator will consciously add some time adverbs or other transitional words. For example:

Example 1: 我爹走在自己的田产上，干活的佃户见了，都要双手握住锄头恭敬地叫一声：“老爷”。

Translation: The moment the workers saw Dad strolling around his land they would hold their hoes with both hands and respectfully call out, "Master."

(2) In the original text, adjective phrases, prepositions, and adverb phrases in the clause are advanced to the beginning of the sentence in the translation. Due to the fact that important things in the English language are often placed at the beginning of a sentence, and other auxiliary elements are placed at the end of the sentence. In Chinese expression, the structure is often relatively loose, and each component has no fixed position. For example:

Example 2: 我爹和我，是远近闻名的阔老爷和阔少爷，我们走路时鞋子的声响，都像是铜钱碰来撞去的。

Translation: Near and far, my father and I were known as the old and young rich masters. When

we walked, the sound our shoes made was like the sound of coins clanking against each other.

(3) The clauses expressing the place in the original text often ignore location information, while in English, the sentence structure needs to be adjusted using the “there be” sentence pattern, resulting in a thematic change in the target language sentence. For example:

Example 3: 里面有个胖胖的妓女很招我喜爱，她走路时两片大屁股就像挂在楼前的两只灯笼，晃来晃去。

Translation: There was a fat prostitute there who really won my affection. When she walked, her fat butt was just like the two lanterns that hung outside, shaking from side to side.

(4) The word organization form of the original Chinese sentence is completely changed or reorganized in the English sentence. Due to the loose structure and vague connections in Chinese, many sentences use zero anaphora, which cannot be fully organized in English translation. Making certain adjustments to the thematic structure can help enhance the readability of the translation and preserve the effect of the original text. For example:

Example 4: 那天可真是热闹，城里街道两旁站满了人，手里拿着小彩旗，商店都斜着插出来青天白日旗，我丈人米行前还挂了一幅两扇门板那么大的蒋介石像，米行的三个伙计都站在蒋介石左边的口袋下。

Translation: That was truly an exciting day – both sides of the city streets were flooded with people holding small colored flags. Nationalist flags of a white sun against a blue sky jutted out at a slant from all the shops. My father-in-law even had a portrait of Chiang Kai-shek as large as two doors hanging before his store; the three hired hands at the rice shop stood under Chiang’s right-hand pocket.

(5) In the original text, Chinese emphasizes semantic coherence, with loose structure and mostly implicit connections, while English emphasizes form coherence. After C-E

translation, sentences are mostly subordinate and expressed using conjunctions. For example:

Example 5: 那年沈先生和龙二的赌局，实在是精彩，青楼的赌厅里挤满了人，沈先生和他们三个人赌。

Translation: The games between Mr. Shen and Long Er that year were really amazing. The gambling room at the House of Qing was flooded with people as Mr. Shen gambled with Long Er and his men.

(6) In the original text, when multiple clauses have the same main theme or are unowned, they are usually translated into English using the “it” form as the subject or other pronouns. For example:

Example 6: 那天我在青楼里赌了一夜，脑袋昏昏沉沉像是肩膀上扛了一袋米，我想着自己有半个来月没回家了，身上的衣服一股酸臭味，我就把那个胖大妓女从床上拖起来，让她背着我回家，叫了抬轿子跟在后面，我到了家好让她坐轿子回青楼。

Translation: I spent that whole night gambling at the House of Qing. I felt muddleheaded, as if a heavy bag of rice had been placed on my shoulders. It had been over half a month since I’d been home, and my clothes reeked of a sour stench. I dragged that fat prostitute out of bed and had her carry me home. I also hired a rickshaw coolie to follow us so he could take the prostitute back to the House of Qing once I got home.

(7) In the original text, Chinese emphasizes holistic and visual thinking, and is good at describing things as a whole, while English translation focuses on expressing specific details of things and highlighting key points. For example:

Example 7: 那天傍晚我爹拉屎时不再叫唤，他眯缝着眼睛往远处看，看着那条向城里去的小路慢慢变得不清楚。

Translation: That day as dusk settled, my dad didn’t make a sound while he took his shit. His squinting eyes stared far off, and gradually the

narrow trail leading to town became blurry.

(8) The original text often places the initiator of the action at the beginning of the sentence, becoming the topic of the sentence. After English translation, in order to highlight the content to be expressed, the action content is often placed at the beginning of the sentence, while the true initiator is placed after the sentence, explaining the reason, purpose, and accompanying state. For example:

Example 8: 我的女人抹着眼泪走到她爹米行门口, 站了很长时间, 她看到她爹的脑袋被煤油灯的亮光印在墙上, 她知道他是在清点帐目。

Translation: Wiping the tears from her face, my wife passed the entrance to her father's rice shop. She stood there a long time watching the silhouette of her father's face reflected on the wall by the kerosene lamp. She knew that he was checking the accounts. After standing there for a while, lost in her tears, she left.

3.2 Theme Structure in Third Person Dialogue Novels

The selected content of this article is the sixth chapter of the novel *Chronicle of a Blood Merchant* and its English translation. The changes in its thematic structure are summarized as follows.

The number of sentences in original text	23
The number of sentences with unchanged thematic structure	13
The number of sentences with changed thematic structure	10

Through Contrastive Analysis, it was found that there are changes in the thematic structure of the clauses in the dialogue content, which can be classified as follows:

(1) The theme of the general interrogative

sentence in the original text is a personal pronoun, but in English, the theme changes to a modal verb or auxiliary verb. For example:

Example 9: 许玉兰说: “许三观, 你来帮我搬一下这只箱子, 我一个人搬不动它。”

Translation: Xu Yulan said: “Will you help me move the trunk? I can't move it by myself.”

(2) In the original text, the initiator of the action is often placed at the beginning of the sentence, with the agent or speaker placed in front of sentence. However, in English, the action is placed at the beginning of the sentence to emphasize it. For example:

Example 10: 许三观躺在藤榻里, 两只脚架在凳子上, 徐玉兰走过来说: “许三观, 家里没有米了, 只够晚上吃一顿, 这是粮票, 这是钱, 这是米袋, 你去粮店把米买回来。”

Translation: Xu Sanguan sat back in a rattan chair, his feet resting on a stool. Xu Yulan approached him and said, “Xu Sanguan, we're running out of rice. There's just enough for tonight. Here are the grain coupons, the money, and the rice sack. Go down to the store and buy some rice.”

(3) In the original text, sometimes clauses are used to indicate time, and explicit time conjunctions or adverbs are omitted. When translating into English, it is necessary to flexibly use time adverbial clauses and other phrases as the theme in conjunction with the context. For example:

Example 11: 许三观说: “我不能去买米, 我现在什么事都不做了, 我回家就要享受。”

Translation: Xu Sanguan said, “I'm not going to buy the rice. I'm not going to do anything around here anymore. As soon as I come home, all I'm going to do is sit back and enjoy myself.”

(4) In the original text, in order to highlight the central character of the topic, it is usually placed at the beginning of the sentence. However, in English, both parties know the object of discussion. To avoid repetition, highlight new

information, and make the context closely connected, the subject can be omitted and imperative sentences can be used.

Example 13: 许三观说: “扛不起一百斤, 就扛五十斤。”

Translation: Xu Sanguan said, “Then get fifty”

Example 14: “那你就扛二十五斤。”

Translation: “Try twenty- five”

By contrasting the thematic structures of the clauses in these two chapters of Chinese novels and their translations, it can be concluded that nearly half of the thematic structures have been consistently retained. However, in order to ensure the translation more fluent and coherent, the translator has adjusted the thematic structures of some sentences. In addition, both chapters have changes in the structural states of the theme, such as “preposing action”, “preposing adverbial clause”, and “it/here as theme”.

4. Conclusion

The study of thematic analysis in the translation of narrative novels shows that more than half of the sentence undergo thematic structures in translation process. In short, in order to achieve formal and content equivalence between the original work and the translated version, the translator has split the Chinese paragraphs. Although most of them retain the language form of the original Chinese text, adjustments have been made to a few thematic structures, which may be related to the narrative angles of different people. This article analyzes two styles of novels with different narrative perspectives. Due to their different narrative forms, their thematic structures undergo significant changes, which can be classified as follows:

- (1) To improve the logic of the translation, add temporal adverbial clauses;
- (2) The adjective phrases, adverb phrases, prepositions, etc. are advanced to the beginning of the translated sentence as

the theme;

- (3) To ensure the completeness of the translation, adjust the textual structure using sentence patterns such as “there be” or “it”;
- (4) The organizational form of words is completely changed or reorganized in English sentences;
- (5) Place the agent after the action in the translation to explain the reason, purpose, and accompanying state, etc;
- (6) In the English translation, the change in subordinate structure expression leads to a change of the theme;
- (7) Other types of thematic structural changes, such as thematic changes in interrogatives.

Based on Contrastive Analysis of texts, there are two main factors that affect the changes in the thematic structure of narrative novel translation: (1) Due to the different expression habits of the two languages, the different choices of themes, the different starting points of narration, and the different meanings and information centers to be conveyed; (2) It is necessary to balance the correct communication of the original information and the coherence and cohesion of the organization of the article. Therefore, the translator's choice of translation strategy is crucial. When translating Chinese novels into English, the translator should try to preserve the thematic structure of the original text as much as possible without affecting the communicative meaning of the original text. But if the thematic structure is not changed, it will affect the understanding of the meaning of the original text, and then it is necessary to adjust the thematic structure.

This paper is supported by the General Project for the Central Universities “ Innovative Research on Chinese Run-on Sentences in the Digital-Intelligent Era” (JB2025093).

References

- Baker, M. (1992). *In other words: A coursebook on translation*. London: Routledge.
- Danes, F. (1974). Functional sentence perspective and the organization of the text. In F. Danes (Ed.), *Papers in functional sentence perspective* (pp. 106-128). Prague: Academic.
- Di Pietro, R. J. (1978). *Language structure in contrast*. Massachusetts: Newbury House Publisher.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (1994). *An introduction to functional grammar* (2nd ed.). London: Arnold Press.
- Halliday, M. A. K. (2000). *An introduction to functional grammar* (Chinese ed.). Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press & London: Edward Arnold (Publishers) Limited.
- Hatim, B., & Mason, I. (2001). *Discourse and the translator*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.
- Li, C. N., & Thompson, S. A. (1976). Subject and topic: A new typology of language. In C. N. Li (Ed.), *Subject and topic* (pp. 457-489). New York: Academic Press.
- Thompson, G. (2000). *Introducing functional grammar*. Beijing: Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press.
- 胡壮麟. (1994). 语篇的衔接与连贯 [Cohesion and coherence in discourse]. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.
- 胡壮麟. (2007). 语言学教程 [Linguistics coursebook]. 北京: 北京大学出版社.
- 胡壮麟, 朱永生, & 张德禄. (1989). 系统功能语法概论 [Introduction to systemic functional grammar]. 湖南: 湖南教育出版社.
- 黄国文. (2004). 翻译研究的功能语言学途径 [A functional linguistic approach to translation studies]. *中国翻译*, (5), 49-52.
- 黄衍. (1985). 试论英语主位和述位 [On English theme and rheme]. *外国语(上海外国语学院学报)*, (5), 17-20.
- 李明. (2009). 得意岂能忘形——从《傲慢与偏见》的两种译文看文学翻译中主位—信息结构之再现 [On the representation of theme-information structure in literary translation of *Pride and Prejudice*]. *广东外语外贸大学学报*, (4), 109-112.
- 刘士聪, & 余东. (2000). 试论以主/述位作翻译单位 [On using theme/rheme as translation units]. *外国语(上海外国语大学学报)*, (3), 30-34.
- 刘文翠, & 崔桂华. (2005). 主述位结构与信息结构的比较研究 [A comparative study of theme-rheme and information structure]. *东北师大学报*, (6), 118-120.
- 彭宣维. (2000). 汉英语篇综合对比 [A contrastive study of Chinese and English discourse]. 上海: 上海外语教育出版社.
- 杨芳. (2013). 主位结构视角下新闻英语汉译的分析研究 [Analysis of English-Chinese news translation from the perspective of theme structure]. *西安外国语大学学报*, (2), 97-100.
- 赵元任. (1979). 汉语口语语法 [Grammar of spoken Chinese] (吕叔湘, Trans.). 北京: 商务印书馆.
- 朱永生. (1995). 主位推进模式与语篇分析 [Theme progression patterns and discourse analysis]. *外语教学与研究*, (3), 6-12, 80.
- 朱永生, & 严世清. (2005). 系统功能语言学多维思考 [Multidimensional perspectives in systemic functional linguistics]. 上海: 上海教育出版社.