

Chapter 6

Textual Equivalence: Thematic and Information Structures

6.1 A Hallidayan Overview of Information Flow

One of the fundamental aspects of textual equivalence in translation is the concept of **information flow**, which is central to the structure of discourse. Michael Halliday, a key figure in systemic functional linguistics, proposed that information is structured according to **theme** and **rheme**. Understanding these elements is crucial for translators seeking to preserve coherence and meaning when transferring a text from one language to another.

Theme and Rheme in Translation

In Halliday's framework, every clause consists of two main components:

1. **Theme:** The starting point of the message, setting the context for what follows.
2. **Rheme:** The part of the sentence that provides new information about the theme.

For example, in the sentence:

The translation process is complex.

- **Theme:** The translation process
- **Rheme:** is complex.

The choice of theme impacts how the sentence connects with previous and subsequent discourse. Translators must be mindful of maintaining thematic coherence to ensure the translated text aligns with the original intent.

Marked vs. Unmarked Themes

A **marked theme** is one that deviates from the usual syntactic structure, adding emphasis. In English, an unmarked theme is usually the subject:

- *She completed the project on time.* (Unmarked)
- *On time, she completed the project.* (Marked)

Languages differ in how they express marked themes. In translation, adjusting sentence structure while maintaining emphasis is key. For instance, in languages like Japanese or Arabic, subject-prominent structures might be rephrased to accommodate information flow.

Given vs. New Information

Halliday also distinguishes between **given** and **new** information, guiding the natural flow of a sentence:

- **Given information:** What is already known or inferred.
- **New information:** What is being introduced for the first time.

Translators must preserve this balance. Consider the English sentence:

John bought a car. The car is red.

In translation, restructuring might be needed to reflect proper given-new order. Some languages require pronouns or particles to maintain information hierarchy.

Implications for Translation

Understanding information flow is crucial for:

- Preserving coherence.
- Ensuring logical progression of ideas.
- Avoiding unnatural phrasing.

A translator must determine whether to **preserve** or **adapt** thematic structure depending on the linguistic constraints of the target language.

6.2 The Prague School Position on Information Flow: Functional Sentence Perspective

The **Prague School**, particularly scholars like Jan Firbas, introduced the concept of **Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)**, which extends Halliday's theme-rheme model by incorporating **communicative dynamism**.

Functional Sentence Perspective (FSP)

FSP classifies elements of a sentence based on their communicative role:

1. **Theme (Contextual Frame):** What the sentence is about, often known information.
2. **Transition:** A bridge between old and new information.
3. **Rheme (Focus):** The most informative part, carrying new meaning.

Example:

The book was written by an expert.

- **Theme:** The book
- **Transition:** was written
- **Rheme:** by an expert

In translation, maintaining proper FSP is vital for clarity and emphasis.

Word Order and Information Distribution

Different languages structure information differently. English follows Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, whereas languages like Russian or Latin allow more flexibility due to inflection. This affects translation choices.

Consider the English sentence:

A new law was passed by the government.

A more dynamic translation into Spanish might rephrase it to emphasize the **government**:

El gobierno aprobó una nueva ley. (The government passed a new law.)

This adaptation ensures the translated sentence retains the intended focus and coherence.

Communicative Dynamism and Emphasis

FSP assigns different weights to sentence elements based on **communicative dynamism** (CD). The **rheme** carries the highest CD, making it the focal point. In translation, adapting sentence structure to align with target-language emphasis patterns is crucial.

For instance:

- English: *She suddenly realized the truth.*
- French: *Elle a soudainement réalisé la vérité. (Suddenly, she realized the truth.)*

Here, the adverb *soudainement* retains emphasis, but slight reordering ensures natural fluency.

Implications for Translation

1. **Sentence Restructuring:** Adjusting word order to maintain the natural flow of information.
2. **Context Sensitivity:** Ensuring that the **given-new** relationship is preserved.
3. **Focus Preservation:** Highlighting the rheme correctly in the target language.

Conclusion

Textual equivalence depends significantly on information structuring. Both Halliday's **theme-rheme model** and the Prague School's **Functional Sentence Perspective** provide valuable insights into preserving meaning and emphasis in translation. Translators must balance:

- **Structural adjustments** for linguistic differences.
- **Communicative effectiveness** to maintain reader comprehension.
- **Cohesion and coherence** to ensure logical discourse progression.

Mastering these principles enhances translation accuracy, making texts more readable and culturally appropriate in the target language.