

## **A Contrastive Study of Theme in English and Azerbaijani Turkish Fictional Texts**

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Thematisation is one of the troublesome areas both for translation purposes from or into English and also for learning EFL. The main reason for the problem lies in the fact that usually different languages structure thematisation in different ways. Therefore, the present research is an attempt to investigate contrastively: experiential (topical), interpersonal and textual themes in a sample of Azeri Turkish and English short stories. Specifically, it aims to find out whether these three kinds of themes have similar occurrences in these two languages or not. To characterize thematising in fictional texts on an empirical basis the model of analyzing theme as suggested by Halliday (2002) is applied to a small corpus of two short stories. The study revealed that in both English and Azeri Turkish, experiential, textual and interpersonal themes are used more frequently in this order respectively. It is hoped that the results of this study can contribute to both theoretical and applied linguistics.

Keywords: experiential, interpersonal and textual theme, rheme.

Every sentence has “a starting point of the utterance” (Brown and Yule 1983, p.126) which is called theme and the rest of the sentence which explains about the theme is called rheme. The present research is the result of an attempt to compare and contrast theme despite the fact that the other component of thematisation,

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i.e. rheme has also been explained at the outset. The observation that different kinds of themes in two languages are of particular significance in the act of translation and in the practices of EFL learning prompted the present study. The research corpus was therefore carefully scrutinized in order to find out whether these two languages utilize different types of themes-experiential, interpersonal and textual as suggested by Halliday (2002) in the same or similar manner or not. Before starting the actual research report a brief word about Azeri Turkish seems to be in order.

Azeri Turkish, also called Azeri, Azari, the Azerbaijani language, or Azerbaijani Turkish is one of the dominant languages spoken in Iran. The language spoken today is believed to be one of the two major off springs of the south western Oghuz language. The other major subdivision is the Anatolian or Ottoman Turkish spoken in Turkey. Azeri Turkish belongs to the agglutinative family of Ural-Altaic languages. Different dialects of this language are widely spoken in many parts especially in North West of Iran. It is also spoken in the Republic of Azerbaijan, southern Dagestan, Armenia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, Iraq, Jordan, Syria, Turkey and even USA (Wikipedia).

The number of the speakers is estimated to be about one-third of the population of Iran (Fischer, 1980, p.78; Heyat, 2000, p.7) and about 8million in the Republic of Azerbaijan (Wikipedia). In the republic of Azerbaijan nowadays this language is written in Roman alphabet. In Iran, since the official language of the country and the language of education is Farsi, very few Azeris have managed to develop the ability to read and to a lesser degree to write in their mother tongue and those infinitesimal individuals use Farsi alphabet which is a version of Arabic orthography.

#### Background

According to Halliday (1985) theme is the starting point for the message and the rest of the clause is labeled as rheme. Technically speaking theme is defined as "... information that is not new to the reader or listener" and the rheme is defined as "... information that is new" (Richards, Platt and Platt; 1992, p.149).

Therefore, theme is sometimes loosely referred to as *given* information and rheme is called *new* information. Marefat and Tahririan (2001) state that given information shows what the sentence is about and the new information explains more about theme. Lassen (quoted in Young and Harrison 2004, p.289) believes that “The theme is usually picked from within a chunk of given information and the rheme often coincides with new information”. Which constituent of the utterance should be “picked” for emphasis generally would depend on the speaker or writer himself. In other words, the speaker himself/herself decides which element of the clause/sentence should come or should be highlighted first. The element(s) brought to the front are called themes (McCarthy1991). Halliday (2002, P.31) remarks that “the thematic system is speaker-oriented, in the sense that the theme is the speaker’s chosen point of departure ...”. Halliday also observes that the analysis of text can be characterized by different features, one of which is “thematisation strategies” (quoted in Yarmohammadi, 1995). i.e. the word or words the writer or the speaker decides to put at the beginning of the clauses or sentences. “The theme of a sentence-what the sentence is concerned with, what it is ‘about’- is marked as thematic in English by occurring in initial position” (Stillar, 1998, P.46).

According to Halliday (2002) the theme may consist of , a single element, as in the clause e.g. ‘Mary’ in *Mary went to the market* or ‘complex element, e.g., ‘*Mary and her little sister*’ in ‘*Mary and her little sister went to the market*’. Of course, theme differs in different types of sentences such as declarative, imperative and interrogative. This is shown in the following table adapted from Halliday.

Table 1.

*Theme in Different Types of Sentences (Halliday, 2002, p.31)*

| Theme             | Rheme                       | Type of sentence     |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------|
| He                | calls her snooky-ookums.    | declarative          |
| (“You”)           | listen to those squawaks.   | imperative           |
| What in the world | can they see in each other? | wh-interrogative     |
| Can               | you believe that?           | yes-no interrogative |

Halliday (2002, P.31) further believes that “in the declarative and imperative moods, the unmarked theme is the subject; ...in the interrogative mood, the unmarked theme depends on the type of interrogative: it is the wh-element in a wh-type interrogative, and the finite element of the verb in a yes/no interrogative”.

According to Yarmohammadi (1995, P.102) “The unmarked theme for any clause is determined by the choice of mood: subject in declarative, wh-or finite element in interrogative, [zero] in imperative or minor clauses”. Usually, the ‘starting point’ is considered the theme:

“Semantically, the unmarked theme is the natural starting point for the particular speech function...” (Yarmohammadi, 1995, P.103). In sum, themes can be considered as the main elements of the clause and rhemes can be considered as the elements which move the communication / message forward.

However, the above observation is not universal because as Downing (2001) mentions different linguists have different views regarding theme / rheme and given / new dichotomy. If we consider for example Fries’ terms ‘the combining approach’ theme can be regarded as ‘given’ and rheme as ‘new’. However, if we consider them separately, then we are following Halliday’s perspective (2002) who believes in disentangling ‘information structure (given-new) from thematic structure (theme /rheme)’.

Another important observation is the fact that the ‘starting point’ is not always the grammatical subject of the sentence, that is ‘adverbs or adverbial phrases may precede the grammatical subject’; in these cases, we consider the adverbs or adverbial phrases as the theme, for example, *early morning*, *later*, *yesterday*, etc.

Furthermore, Halliday (2002) believes that there are other adverbials called ‘metalingual comments’ which also come at the beginning of the clause (thematized) such as *obviously*, *between you and me*, *of course*, etc.; however, they do not contribute to the flow of the information in the same way as theme does. Rather, by using them, the speaker/writer wants to describe the way s/he feels on what s/he is saying. Shokouhi and Kamyab (2004, p.66)

claim "...givenness or newness depends on whether a referents is already mentioned in a text or not".

Regarding classification of themes according to Halliday (quoted in Hasselgard, 2000) there are three different kinds of themes, namely: experiential, interpersonal and textual and they are defined briefly as follows:

Experiential theme is that kind of theme which signifies participant (e.g., Felix) , action(e.g., cut, gave) and circumstance (e.g., at five o'clock, at the gym)(Halliday quoted by Stillar, 1998).

For textual resources language , Stillar (1998, p.45) states that "the resources of the textual function are used to structure the flow of the information , link different parts of the text with one another , and link the text with its context". Halliday (1985, p.102) states that "the textual theme is some combination of continuative (e.g., oh, well), conjunctive (e.g., then, if) or relative (e.g., that, which)".

Regarding the third kind of theme Halliday (1978, p.21, quoted by Stillar, 1998, p.32) believes that interpersonal resources of language are "...our participation, as speakers, in the speech situation; the roles we take on ourselves and impose on others; our wishes, feelings, attitudes and judgments". Furthermore, Halliday (1985, p.102) states that "the interpersonal theme is modality (e.g., perhaps), interrogative word marker (wh-element or Finite verbal auxiliary) , or vocative". These three kinds of themes are presented with their sub-categories in table 2 below:

The available descriptions of Azeri grammar treat thematising in a more or less similar fashion albeit with different terminology. Zehtabi (2005, p.171-182) in his outstanding work written in Azeri Turkish believes that 'mobtada' (theme/given) is the only component of a sentence which is not dependent on any other constituent of a sentence and usually is used initially in a sentence and all other components of a sentence, referred to as 'khabar' (rheme/new), which are somehow related to or dependent on it, come later in a sentence. Theme is usually expressed by means of nouns, however they can be also marked by pronouns, adjectives, verbal adjectives, verbal adjectival combinations,

nominal adjectives, infinitives, different kinds of compounds, sentence(s) and other parts of speech.

In Azeri Turkish, 'khabar' (rheme) which is dependent on 'mobtada' (theme) is the second major component of a sentence and it signifies the state quality, position, and other characteristics of 'mobtada'. 'Khabar' (rheme) in Azeri Turkish is usually marked by verbs, however it can also be represented by other formal devices such as infinitives, nouns, adjectives, pronouns, and other parts of speech.

Another significant work on the grammar of Azeri is written in Azeri as a series of textbooks by a group of scholars from the Republic of Azerbaijan and was edited and published in Arabic-Azeri orthography in Iran (Behzadi, 2007). According to this seminal work (pp.139-140, 191-192, 442, 431-458) 'mobtada' (theme) is that part or component of a sentence which gives information about the who, what and where of what the sentence is about or of the contents of the sentence. 'Khabar' (rheme) on the other hand is that part of a sentence which is dependent on 'mobtada' (theme) and provides information about what is said about 'mobtada' (theme). Again, it can be said that 'khabar' (rheme) provides answers to questions about what did the subject do? What happened? What is the subject doing? What is happening? What is the subject about to do? What will happen? What is it? Who is the subject? How is the subject? and so on.

Table 2.

*Three Types of Themes (Adapted from Hasselgard, 2000, p.1)*

| Experiential                                 | Interpersonal                                 | Textual                                                                  |
|----------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| topical (participant, process, circumstance) | vocative                                      | continuative: oh, well, yeah, etc.                                       |
|                                              | modal (adjunct): perhaps, maybe, surely, etc. | Structural (conjunction or wh-relative): but, however, that, which, etc. |
|                                              | finite: would, isn't, etc.                    | conjunctive (adjunct): then, if, etc.                                    |
|                                              | wh-(interrogative): when, what, etc.          |                                                                          |

Thus, ‘mobtada’ (theme) and ‘khabar’ (rheme) are the main constituents of a kernel sentence, however, ‘khabar’ (rheme) plays a more crucial role in the formation of a sentence, in that in Azeri Turkish it is possible to have a sentence without ‘mobtada’ (theme) but in order to have a sentence, definitely there must be a ‘khabar’ (rheme).

Ahmadi (2005, p.57, 198-200) another Azeri scholar in his comparative grammar of Azeri Turkish and Farsi observes that in Azeri ‘nahad’ / ‘mosnadonalayh’ (different terms for the same concept of theme) is a noun or any other part of speech which replaces a noun and the performance or acceptance or possession of a state is attributed to it and usually is used at the beginning of a sentence. Ahmadi further observes that while the subject of a sentence can simultaneously be the ‘nahad’ (theme) of that sentence but the opposite is not necessarily true. That is, ‘nahad’ (theme) necessarily does not have to be the subject of the sentence. ‘Mosnad’ (another term for the same concept of rheme) according to Ahmadi (2005) is the word which is attributed to ‘nahad’ (theme).

Finally, it should be mentioned that the observation of McCarthy (1991) among others, who believes that theme is a universal phenomenon, but in different languages, it might be realized differently, was also instrumental in prompting the present research.

## Method

### *Design*

The design of the present study was a contrastive text analysis in that two independent texts originally written in two different languages were under investigation. These types of original-language texts are usually referred to as *comparable texts*. The main objective of this kind of study is to examine the way(s) in which two languages under investigation tend to differ - for example in utilizing different markers, i.e. lexical and or syntactic, as formal devices for the structure under investigation- in this case *theme*. Since this kind of research is usually quantitative, after

identifying and describing the linguistic distance between the languages concerned on particular textual feature, the results are presented statistically.

### *Source Materials*

The data for this study consisted of two short stories: one in *Azeri.Turkish* entitled *ArsizGhaffar* (The ShamlessGhaffar) written by GanjaliSabahi (1906-1989) in about 17 pages. Sabahi was born in Iran, but since he spent several years in Baku before returning to Iran and received his higher education in Azerbaijani language and literature there, he has utilized the literary language in this story which is prevalent both in the Republic of Azerbaijan and in Iranian Azerbaijan. The other story in English entitled *That Evening Sun* is written by William Faulkner in about 14 pages.

### *Procedure*

Data collection and analysis was based on Halliday's framework of theme/rheme organization (2002) and Halliday (quoted in Hasselgard 2000). The two short stories under investigation were read carefully. The Azeri Turkish story in addition to the researchers was checked with two other native speakers of this language as informants and also the following reference works were consulted: 1. Azerbaijani-Persian Dictionary (Behzadi 2003) and 2. Azeri Grammar Book (Zehtabi, 2005). The unit of the analysis was the clause and in each case themes under study were identified and marked. The same procedure was followed for the English short story, that is, it was read by the present researchers and the themes were identified and marked. The study revealed that the Azeri Turkish corpus consisted of 602 examples of themes in general and the English corpus contained 872 themes. The corpus is available on demand and therefore the interested parties should contact the corresponding author.

Below, five examples for each type of theme first in Azeri Turkish and then in English are given respectively. It should be mentioned that according to Faghih (1997) among others, the English translations of Azeri Turkish examples given here are one of the possible ways of rendering them into English, albeit the

most natural equivalent according to the present researchers because the same sentence can be translated in many different ways (Widdowson 1975, p.125).

It should be mentioned that each Turkish example consists of three sections:

1. The Azeri Turkish construction in rough(phonemic) transcription,
2. The literal English translation, and
3. The English equivalent.

It should also be mentioned that in the following section, where examples of Azeri Turkish and English sentences are given respectively, the themes in both cases are given in italic types.

### **Azeri Turkish Examples of Different Types of Themes**

#### **1. Experintional Themes**

1.
  - a. /Ox kimiyanachakilmishgashlari dartilid/ (p.47).
  - b. arrow like long drawn eyebrows frowned
  - c. She frowned her long arrow-like eyebrows.
2.
  - a. /chap chaponabaxarag... / (p.47).
  - b. leftleft to her while looking...
  - c. Looking at him angrily, ....
3.
  - a. /Manelahanashazrniyazveranlardanolmusham / (p.48)
  - b. I always vow need those who have given I have become
  - c. I have always been one of those who have contributed to charity affairs.
4.
  - a. /Insandardinharyetanadiyabilmaz/ (p.50).
  - b. Man his pain every person tell can't
  - c. Man can't talk about his problems to anyone.
- 5.

- a. /birghejamaniyooxuyaverib.../ (p.50).
- b. One night me to sleep gave....
- c. One night, after he stayed up while I fell asleep....

### 1. Textual Themes

1.
  - a. /yoxsabashini at chapip?/ (p.47).
  - b. or your head horse hit
  - c. Or have you gotten crazy?
2.
  - a. /avvaladablasalamverdi/ (p.48).
  - b. first politely hello gave
  - c. First, he greeted him politely.
3.
  - a. /Ammaindiroozgarimgaragalib/ (p.48).
  - b. but now my time black has come
  - c. But now, I am in bad luck.
4.
  - a. /Anjaghavamoolayimvaxoshagalinidi... (p. 53).
  - b. But weather smooth and pleasant looking...
  - c. But the weather was very nice and pleasant...
5.
  - a. /Nahayathaftabashichatir/ (p.55).
  - b. Finally week end reaches
  - c. Finally, it is the end of the week.

### 2. Interpersonal Themes

1.
  - a. /Kishimanamoezaelama/ (p.48).
  - b. man to me advise do not
  - c. Man! Do not advise me.
2.
  - a. /Hanikechmishgotoor goy nazrniyazehtiram?/ (p.49).

- b. Where past picking up putting vow need respect
- c. Where is the respect which existed in the past?
- 3.
  - a. / *Hattatakamooledaedaegalib* boo  
martabiyachatibdir/ (p.53).
  - b. Even improving come this stage has reached.
  - c. Having improved, he has reached this stage.
- 4.
  - a. / *Doghroodandaidalatsizlikdir?* (p.61).
  - b. Infact no justice.
  - c. Infact, it is the time of injustice.
- 5.
  - a. / *Na farghivardir?* (p.64).
  - b. What difference is
  - c. What is the difference?

### English Examples of Different Types of Themes

#### 1. Experiential Themes

- 1. "... *because a nigger full of cocaine* wasn't a nigger any longer" (p.272)
- 2. "*Nancy has her hat on*" (p.274).
- 3. "*Drink some coffee,*" Dilsey said (p.276)
- 4. "*Listen how Caddy and Quentin and Jason talk,*" Nancy said (p.279).
- 5. "*The popcorn* was under the bed too" (p.281)

#### 2. Textual Themes

- 1. "... *and she* couldn't make her hands let go of the window ledge" (p.272).
- 2. "*When Dilsey* was sick in her cabin" (p.272).
- 3. "*Well, he's gone now,*" Father said (p.274).
- 4. "...*but it*splashed out of the cup, onto her hands and her dress" (p.277).
- 5. "*Then,* we came to her house" (p.279).

#### 3. Interpersonal Themes

- 1. "*Is she through?*" Mother said (p.273).
- 2. "*Can you see our eyes too?*" (p.276).

3. "What are you talking so loud for, Nancy?" Caddy said (p.278).
4. "Why *did* she want to go home and bar the door?" Caddy said (p.280).
5. "Maybe we had better," Caddy said (p.280).

### Results and Discussion

As the tables below show, it can be observed that both in English and Azeri Turkish, the experiential (topical) theme is used far more frequently than the other types of themes: the percentage of experiential theme in English is 71.4% and in Azeri Turkish it is 78.8%. Textual theme is the next frequent in English with the frequency of 19.3% while in Azeri Turkish it has the frequency of 11.6%. In both languages, interpersonal theme shows the least frequency: in English with the frequency of 9.3% and in Azeri Turkish it has the frequency of 9.6%.

Table 3.

*Frequency of Different Kinds of Themes in Azeri Turkish.*

| Percent | Frequency | Kind of Theme |
|---------|-----------|---------------|
| 78.8%   | 474       | experiential  |
| 11.6%   | 70        | textual       |
| 9.6%    | 58        | interpersonal |
| 100%    | 602       | total         |

Table 4.

*Frequency of Different Kinds of Themes in English.*

| Percent | Frequency | Kind of Theme |
|---------|-----------|---------------|
| 71.4%   | 623       | experiential  |
| 19.3%   | 168       | textual       |
| 9.3%    | 81        | interpersonal |
| 100%    | 872       | total         |

The findings of the present research indicate that in the first place the high frequency of experiential theme both in Azeri Turkish and English shows that mention of participant, actions and

circumstances occupy a significant role in the structure of clauses in the sentences of both languages. That is to say that, apparently these are the main meaning carrying components of sentences in both language. Secondly, the relatively considerable frequency of textual theme with of course a significant gap from the experiential theme in both languages reveals that the structuring of the flow of the information and its link with different parts of text and the link of the text with that of the context is of secondary importance. Finally since the interpersonal theme has the least frequency in both languages, it means that at least in the corpus under study, the participants' roles and their interaction with others is the least important factor in thematising. This is also the theme type that the most discrepancy between Azeri Turkish and English is observed. Therefore, in sum it can be concluded that since thematisation in fictional texts in the two languages under investigation is very similar, perhaps this is one of the linguistic universals which should be utilized in translation and foreign language studies.

### Conclusion

This study investigated whether experiential, textual and interpersonal themes have the same amount of frequency in both Azeri Turkish and English or not. It was found that although the frequencies are not exactly the same in both languages, experiential, textual and interpersonal themes have more occurrences respectively. Therefore, it can be cautiously concluded that on the basis of the findings of the present study on the realization of themes Azeri Turkish speakers translating from or into English and or trying to learn EFL should not have much problem if the basic tenet of contrastive analysis proper is still a valid proposition.

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