

The function of theme / rheme in the French Presidential New Year Speech

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Keywords: theme/rheme, French Presidential New Year Speech, discursive objective

Abstract

Following the terminology of the Prague school of linguists, the Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that which locates and orients the clause within its context. The remainder of the message, the part in which the Theme is developed, is called in Prague school terminology the Rheme. (Halliday, 2004:64) Theme + Rheme is speaker-oriented, meanwhile, speaker-selected. It is the speaker who assigns both structures, mapping one on to the other to give a composite texture to the discourse and thereby relate it to its environment. (Halliday, 2004:93) The function of theme/rheme provides us an analysis tool to study the development of texts. As theme occupies often the initial position of sentence, we can analyze the choice of Theme elements and Thematic structures both at syntactic and textual level.

The presidential wishes, pronounced by the President of the French Republic on the occasion of New Year's Eve, has been a key event in French politics since the beginning of the Fifth Republic. In his speech, the President takes stock of the economic, political and social situation of the past year, shares his overall vision of France and the world and his wishes for the year to come. With a large audience and a wide range of influences, the study of the New Year Speech is of great significance. Therefore, we took as corpus the French Presidential New Year Speech (2012-2017) to firstly conduct a study of the function of the themes, referring to Halliday's (1967) theme/ rheme theory. It then seems legitimate to ask how the use of the themes will arrive at the realization of the textual function on the one hand, to gain an insight into the texture of the speeches and understand how the writer made clear to us the nature of his underlying concerns on the other hand by analyzing the thematic structure clause by clause.

A number of phenomena have been observed as a result of the study. The high frequency of the temporal functional themes is easily identified. And the causal functional themes also have a high frequency in the French texts. In the final analysis, the choice of themes goes hand in hand with achieving a discursive objective, reflecting the speaker's points of view.

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