

Marked Themes in WKU Student Writing: A Systemic Functional Linguistics-based Analysis

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Abstract. This study looks at marked themes in WKU student writing. Two issues will be investigated in this paper: what are the most popular marked themes and which ones are overused and misused. Multiple case studies approach will be used to analyze the data, which are student writings in WKU according to optimism [5] and SFL theory [4] will be used for analysis. This study has found that the most popular marked theme in WKU is “however”, which is misused most frequently at the same time. This study provides a new perspective to observe academic writings in Sino-foreign universities in China. Linguistics studying ESL writings might be interested in this study.

Keywords: marked theme; student writing.

1. Literature Review

Clause, according to Halliday, has three meta-functions, which are textual, interpersonal and experiential. For the purpose of this study, the textual aspect of the clause will be used as the supporting theory. The textual function of a clause is to deliver messages. This type of clause is structured into two parts, which are theme and rheme. The theme is “the point of departure of the message” [4], which indicates the context of the clause. To elaborate, theme is usually either mentioned previously in the text or is universally acknowledged, which attracts the reader’s attention to the following content. The rheme is “the remainder of the message”, based on which the theme is further illustrated. As Wang [7] explains in her article, a theme usually contains “familiar, old or given information” and rheme contains “unfamiliar or new information”. The thematic structure follows the order that the theme goes first and the rheme next. Theme is divided into two sub-types, which are unmarked theme and marked theme. In a declarative clause, an unmarked theme is one that functions as the subject, while a marked theme is referred to as something else apart from the subject. A marked theme can often be an adverbial group or prepositional phrase; on some occasions, it can also be a complement, which is, therefore, the “most marked” kind of theme [4]. Figure 1 gives a detailed elaboration of the distinction between marked and unmarked theme in a declarative clause. Figure 2 identifies unmarked theme in different moods of clauses. Marked theme can be recognized by excluding those which are unmarked [4].

| | Function* | Class | Clause example |
|----------------|------------|--|--|
| unmarked Theme | Subject | nominal group: pronoun as Head | I # had a little nut-tree she # went to the baker's there # were three jovial Welshmen |
| | | nominal group: common or proper noun as Head | a wise old owl # lived in an oak Mary # had a little lamb London Bridge # is fallen down |
| | | nominalization | what I want # is a proper cup of coffee |
| | | marked Theme | Adjunct |
| marked Theme | Complement | nominal group: common or proper noun as Head | a bag-pudding # the King did make Eliot # you're particularly fond of |
| | | nominal group: pronoun as Head | all this # we owe both to ourselves and to the peoples of the world [[who are so well represented here today]] this # they should refuse |
| | | nominalization | what they could not eat that night # the Queen next morning fried |

Figure 1. Examples of theme in declarative clause [4]

| MOOD of clause | Typical ('unmarked') Theme |
|--------------------------|---|
| declarative | nominal group functioning as Subject |
| interrogative: yes/no | first word (finite operator) of verbal group plus nominal group functioning as Subject |
| interrogative: wh- | nominal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase functioning as interrogative (Wh-) element |
| imperative: 'you' | verbal group functioning as Predicator, plus preceding <i>don't</i> if negative |
| imperative: 'you and me' | <i>let's</i> plus preceding <i>don't</i> if negative |
| exclamative | nominal group or adverbial group functioning as exclamative (Wh-) element |

Figure 2. Mood type and unmarked theme selection [4]

Previous research show that Chinese English learners have a greater tendency to use marked theme structure than native English speakers both in oral and written context. For instance, Chen Xiao's research compared speeches delivered by advanced Chinese English learners and native English speakers based on corpus [2]. Chen found that Chinese English learners tend to "use more marked theme structures, especially fronted adjuncts" in their speeches because of "the word order and information structure of Chinese" [2]. Another corpus-based research listed the most frequently used thematized connectors and topic-fronting devices among Chinese academic English writers such as "and", "also", "furthermore", "moreover" and so on, which lead to the overproduction of marked themes [3]. A case study comparing expository essays written by Chinese college students and a North American student shows that Chinese English learners repeatedly use circumstantial elements as marked themes [6].

However, most studies were carried out in traditional Chinese universities and contexts outside of mainland China such as Hong Kong, Singapore, and contexts beyond. Very few studies have been conducted in contexts such as EMI contexts in mainland China. The questions that this study aims at are similar to those raised in Chinese universities which are:

(1) What are the most popular marked themes used by novice writers of English in the academic context?

(2) Which ones are overused and misused?

The answers to these questions will contribute to the understanding of novice writers in China but from the context of EMI which has not been studied before.

2. Method

In this study, multiple case study will be used as the research approach because it sheds light on variables relevant to the entity of the case as well as elaborate the interconnected relationship among these variables [1]. However, a limitation of case studies suggests that a case study is only capable of explaining its own micro-context and it is unable to apply to the macro-context beyond itself. Therefore, LoD, or language of description [1] is adopted to present the results of this study. In this way, studies can "generalize and abstract from the particularities of the case study without losing its specificities" [1]. Also, more than one case study, in other words, multiple case studies will be carried out to ensure the result to be correct and precise.

As Holliday elaborates the principles of opportunism, written studies are supposed to mirror their social context [5], therefore the data used in this study are student writings in WKU. These student writings are offered by the researcher's instructor from her philosophy class teaching critical thinking skills. Students from all majors in Sophomore, Junior and Senior years can take it. These students have finished their ESL and college composition courses; hence they have the ability to write complete essays, which enables the researcher to analyze from the linguistic perspective. Each of these papers is collaborative work written by four students as a group. These groups are formed voluntarily by the students themselves. Since every paper is composed and revised by a team of randomly organized students, the data is more representative and powerful than that of individual work. Every group chose a different topic from the list offered by the instructor. However, the papers are all classified in the same genre, argumentative essay, which is common in university-level writing.

The analysis is done by manual work rather than by corpus. The reason why corpus is not used is that it does not distinguish different genres. Another research did in a Chinese context used corpus to analyze the data and came to the conclusion that Chinese English writers tend to use logical connections as marked themes [3]. However, some of these marked themes may be reasonable in their genres. The sample essays will be cut into clauses but the paragraphs remain unchanged, therefore in the results and discussion section the researcher gives specific paragraph numbers. Since the data in this study belong to the argumentative genre, some marked themes act as logical conjunctions, which means that they are not misused. Through manual analysis, some marked themes will be identified as used correctly.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Popular Marked Themes

The results of data analysis agree with former research. The corpus-based research carried out by Green's team found that thematized connectors and topic-fronting devices are used most frequently by Chinese students such as "and", "also", "furthermore", "moreover" and so on [3]. Take Student Paper 1 as an example:

If the couple did not have sex before marriage, they will be strange in their sexual behavior. Indeed, harmonious sex is really important during the couples' married life. According to the research from Vice Present of China sexology association Ma Xiaonian disharmonious sex is the major reason cause Divorce. So premarital sex will help you know whether or not both of you will have a harmonious sex life or help you have a harmonious sex life after marriage. Certainly, harmonious sex life has benefit for couple's health. According to the research harmonious sex can keep cytoactive. In other words, a disharmonious sex will make your cells activity deficiency in the future sex life. For example, harmonious sex life like body building and disharmonious sex life like load working.

There are eight marked themes in this paragraph, all of which are underlined. Among them, "If the couple did not have sex before marriage", "According to the research from Vice Pre[sident] China sexology association Ma Xiaonian", and "According to the research" are topic-front devices; "Indeed", "So", and "Certainly" are thematized connectors.

In Student Paper 2:

Since ancient times, there have been some people love another people of the same gender. Although up to this day, a large number of countries and people against the same-sex marriage, the number of homosexuals is larger and larger. Until 2016, the research reported there are more than 70 million people are homosexuals in the world, because there are some countries allow the same-sex marriage. The most typical representatives are Canada, Brazil, some European countries and so on. In the United States, there were 37 states agree on the same-sex marriage in the 2015 year, and now, homosexuals can marry all across the country. In China, more and more people recognize the homosexual and support their position.

"Since ancient times", "In the United States", and "In China" are topic-front devices; "Although", "Until", and "because" are thematized connectors.

Another research comparing essays written by a Chinese college student and a North American student claims that Chinese English writers prefer to use circumstantial elements as marked themes [6]. Take Student Paper 4 as an example:

The advocates of physician-assisted suicide think that "Everyone has a right to a good death, therefore a good death must not be denied those who want one." Rational persons long for a good and dignified death, if someone desires a good death, no one has the right to denied him or her. Physician-assisted suicide keeps them away from wrongful death. However, the physician-assisted suicide may not be the patient's' voluntary choices. They may choose death by pressured, rather than become a heavy burden of their families. Many people desire to die because they are not able to help and contribute to their loved ones and the whole communities. They will feel they are useless and worthless. Therefore, the feelings of disappointment can be the reason that many suffering people want to die.

The circumstantial element “therefore” appears twice in this short paragraph and it appears five times in the whole essay, which is of high frequency for a two thousand level paper.

In Student Paper 5:

On the one hand, if the company has a small scale, patenting genes can avoid the competition between big companies. So as a result, this small company can specialize in researching certain genes fragments. It will lead each organization to do their research under a better environment without pressure from other organizations in the same area. On the other hand, with this kind of patent, research organizations can produce medicines or some other related products. For example, genetically modified products. These products will bring benefits to societies and also profits to the institutions. So, in the future, more and more companies will enter this gene area.

The circumstantial element “so” appears twice in this short paragraph while its frequency in the entire paper is only three times, which suggests that “so” is overused in this paragraph.

After analyzing the six papers, the researcher was able to draw a chart showing the results. The table below shows the frequency of popular marked themes in the entire data set.

Table 1. Frequently used marked themes in Paper 1-6

| Marked themes | Numbers in total |
|---------------|------------------|
| However | 25 |
| And | 22 |
| Because | 22 |
| If ... | 20 |
| So | 17 |
| Therefore | 15 |
| According to | 11 |
| But | 10 |
| Then | 5 |

As the table shows, the most popular marked theme in WKU student writing is “however”; “and” along with “because” are the second to most popular marked theme with the same frequency of twenty-two times; “if” ranks the third with a frequency of twenty times. Among them, “however” and “because” are logical connectors; “and” is a conjunction; “if” is a supposition. This result corresponds to the genre – argumentative essay, which is one of the most common text types in university writing. Thus, this result can be applied to most of WKU student writings which are argumentative.

The result is different from former research in details. In Green’s research (see Figure 3 below), the most popular marked theme in Chinese college student writing is “and”, a conjunction; the second to most popular marked theme is “also”, a conjunction; the third to most popular marked theme is “because”, a logical connector. In short, during their writing processes, WKU students prefer using logical connectors while students in traditional Chinese universities use conjunctions more frequently.

The reason why the two results differ might be differences in the language of instruction and the education environment. Green’s research stands in the context of CMI (Chinese as a medium of instruction) and traditional Chinese universities. English classes are taught by Chinese teachers in Mandarin, which enlarges the impact of L1, Chinese. This study, however, sits in the context of EMI (English as a medium of instruction) and Sino-US university. All courses are taught by foreign teachers in English. Also, in the first year of university, all students are required to take academic writing courses, in which teachers correct students’ errors in writing and reduce the influence of L1. Thus, WKU students may have a higher ability to produce long sentences without the necessity of using conjunctions.

| | Thematised connectors and topic-fronting devices | Occurrences |
|----|---|-------------|
| 1 | And | 8598 |
| 2 | Also | 8369 |
| 3 | Because | 6924 |
| 4 | Therefore | 4422 |
| 5 | Moreover | 3211 |
| 6 | Although | 2874 |
| 7 | Besides | 2557 |
| 8 | Furthermore | 1319 |
| 9 | Actually | 1250 |
| 10 | Finally | 1023 |
| 11 | Firstly | 723 |

Figure 3. Results of Green’s research [3]

3.2 Overused and Misused Marked Themes

According to the data, the overused and misused marked themes by WKU students can be divided into eight types, including logical connector, logical conjunction, supposition, reference, intensity, example raising, and idea expressing, see Table 2 below.

Table 2. Overused and misused marked themes in Student Paper 1-6

| | Overused | Misused |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| Logical connector | However, Because, So, Therefore, But, All in all, On the other hand | However, So, On the other hand, Moreover, What’s more, Because, Not only that, In addition, All in all |
| conjunction | And, Then | And, Then, At last, Until |
| Grammar or spelling mistake | | As we all known, On the one hand, On the country, As see from the analysis on privacy issue, To this issue, Final, As seen from the analysis of our basic condition, As consequence of the duty of physicians, In other word, AS a famous saying goes, In a further study |
| Supposition | If ... | Otherwise |
| Reference | According to ... | According to the research from Vice Present of China sexology association Ma Xiaonian |
| Intensity | | Indeed, Certainly, Actually, Absolutely, Obviously |
| Example raising | | For example, Such as |
| Idea expressing | | As far as I’m concerned |

Most of the overused marked themes are logical connectors. In all six student essays, the word “however” is overused for twenty-one times; “because” is overused for sixteen times; “and” is overused for sixteen times, which is of the same frequency as that of “because”; “if” is overused for 15 times; “so” is overused for fourteen times; “therefore” is overused for eleven times; “according to” is overused for eight times; “but” is overused for four times; “then” is overused for three times; “all in all” is overused for two times; “on the other hand” is overused for two times. The reasons why students overused these logical connections can be:

(1) L1 influences L2 learning. In Student Paper 1:

If the couple did not have sex before marriage, they will be strange in their sexual behavior.

If sex must involve commitment, those Never-Marry people will be faced with a huge problem about how to solve their sex need.

if the sex didn't infringe each other's rights, it is completely no problem based on the moral and the law.

If the men refuse to be responsible for the pregnancy, girls have to raise the child by themselves with a broken heart or have an abortion, which does a great harm to their health.

If the girl continues to break up, the man will publish the nude photos.

If sex must involve commitment, these private photographs of Edison Chen with various women will not appear.

The students use the supposition “if” six times in this paper, which is probably the influence of Chinese high school composition. In Chinese argumentative essays, students are encouraged to use suppositions as evidence.

(2) The students do not have a good command of logic. In Student Paper 3:

All in all, same-sex lovers share same right as any citizen and same-sex marriage shouldn't be prohibit (paragraph 5).

All in all, the main problem of this argument is how to get an offspring (paragraph 6).

In conclusion, this essay has argued that it is not morally right to prohibit same-sex marriage in today's society (paragraph 8).

The phrase “all in all” has the same meaning as “in conclusion”, which means that it should only appear once at the end of the essay. However, this paper uses “all in all” twice in two adjacent body paragraphs, which is too frequent.

(3) The influence of spoken English. In Student Paper 5:

People who patent human genes only patent the method of coping, sequencing, changing and analyzing genes. So, under such a condition, a patent can be seen as a guarantee from the government. And with this guarantee, we strongly believe that genetic program will have a bright future.

The connector “So” as well as “And” is not necessary for this context. The text is still logical if the students delete the two logical connectors. Nevertheless, if this piece of text is considered as a speech note, then these two connectors fit well in the context because spoken language is less precise than written language.

(4) The students do not have a big lexicon, which means that they cannot come up with enough vocabulary to replace the overused one. For instance, in Student Paper 6:

However, with the development of the society and the improvement of human rights consciousness, some people begin to oppose the death penalty because they realize that the death penalty is cruel and infeasible, so they think the death penalty should be abolished.

However, what happens in North Carolina over the past several years questions the effectiveness of deterrence of death penalty.

However, criminals in different colors and races have been treated differently when some judges made their decision.

However, Edward (2016) thinks that the death penalty gets involved in the morality.

The word “however” is used for four times throughout the essay whereas there are other synonyms that can replace it, such as “nevertheless” and “yet”.

In all six student papers, the word “and” is misused for nine times; “so” is misused for five times; “however” is misused for five times; “indeed” is misused for three times; “on the other hand”,

“certainly”, “then”, “actually” are each misused for two times; the remaining marked themes are each misused for one time. Misuse of marked themes has more causes, including:

(1) Misunderstanding of logical relationship. For example:

According to the research from Vice Present of China sexology association Ma Xiaonian disharmonious sex is the major reason cause Divorce. So premarital sex will help you know whether or not both of you will have a harmonious sex life or help you have a harmonious sex life after marriage (Student Paper 1).

The connector “So” is misused because the two issues “sex is the major reason cause Divorce” and “premarital sex will help ...” are not in the relationship of cause and effect.

Until 2016, the research reported there are more than 70 million people are homosexuals in the world, because there are some countries allow the same-sex marriage (Student Paper 2).

The connector “because” is misused because sexual preference is not influenced by laws.

Suppose that states prohibit same-sex marriage and punish them, does it mean states consider same-sex lovers are wrong and rejecting them? If that, we think it totally infringe the privileges of marriage. All in all, same-sex lovers share same right as any citizen and same-sex marriage shouldn’t be prohibit (Student Paper 3).

The connection “All in all” is not properly used because the idea “same-sex lovers share same right as any citizen and same-sex marriage shouldn’t be prohibit” is not the conclusion of what is stated previously.

(2) Grammar or spelling mistake. For example:

According to the research from Vice Present of China sexology association Ma Xiaonian disharmonious sex is the major reason cause Divorce (Student Paper 1).

To this issue, I agree with the point of we need to take the good and reject the bad (Student Paper 2).

Suppose that one man loves another man, but because it against laws and discrimination from others (Student Paper 3).

On the country, patenting genes offers a more transparent way for those scientists and organizations who want to do further research (Student Paper 5).

In other word, as Edward said, the killers like those described above deserve the death penalty but they finally get less than death (Student Paper 6).

In Paper 1, the students do not recognize the difference between “present” and “president”; in Paper 2, the students use the wrong preposition; in Paper 3, the students fail to meet the rule of subject-verb concord; in Paper 5, the students cannot distinguish between “country” and “contrary”; in Paper 6, the students misuse the phrase “in other words”. This kind of mistakes can be avoided by proofreading and more learning.

(3) Wrong use of intensity. For example:

Indeed, this essay will argue that it is morally right to prohibit same-sex marriage (Student Paper 2).

Indeed, the purpose of this essay is to clarify that it is morally wrong to prohibit same-sex marriage to deprive marriage freedom from homosexuals (Student Paper 3).

Indeed, this essay will argue that death penalty should be abolished and death penalty does not work (Student Paper 6).

Three out of six papers, which include half of the students, misuse the intensity word “Indeed”.

If the men refuse to be responsible for the pregnancy, girls have to raise the child by themselves with a broken heart or have an abortion, which does a great harm to their health. Actually, in the old China, premarital pregnant girls are considered to be dissolute. Those girls will be put in a “pig cage” and thrown into a river to be drowned (Student Paper 1).

The word “Actually” is used improperly because the original purpose of this group of students was not to make corrections of the former idea but to give supplementary information.

(4) Improper example raising. For instance:

For example, harmonious sex life like body building and disharmonious sex life like load working (Student Paper 1).

In fact, the number of Never-Marry people in our world increase quickly in recent years. For example, a new Pew Research says, “the number of Americans who have always been single and will never marry is at a historic high (Student Paper 1).

The members may be different among different countries. For example, there are more than 5% people in San Francisco are homosexuals (Student Paper 3).

In the example of Student Paper 1, the students are making analogies rather than raising examples; in the second example, the students cite the research to prove the fact “the number of Never-Marry people in our world increase quickly in recent years” that they stated previously, they mess up the definition of proof and that of example; in the third example, San Francisco is a city, not a country, so the example is not appropriate.

To conclude, WKU students overuse marked themes mainly because of (1) L1 influence; (2) the students do not possess good logic; (3) influenced by oral English; (4) lack of lexicon. The misuse of marked themes mainly due to these reasons: (1) wrong understanding of the logic; (2) false grammar or spelling; (3) improper use of intensity; (4) inappropriate use of examples.

4. Conclusion

Former research has already found that Chinese English learners have the tendency to use marked theme structure, especially fronted adjuncts, circumstantial elements, and topic-fronting devices in both writing and speaking [2, 3, 6]. This study looking into marked theme choices of WKU students in academic essays aims to solve two questions asked at the beginning of this paper: (1) what are the most popular marked themes used by novice writers of English in the academic context? (2) Which ones are overused and misused? The participants of this study are WKU students, whose papers are offered by the instructor due to opportunistic reasons [5]. The papers are group works by these students, who were at least Sophomore when they attended the course, thus these papers are qualified for analysis. The textual analysis is done manually in accordance with Halliday’s SFL theory [4]. This study uses case study approach instead of the corpus because machines cannot identify which marked themes are used properly regarding the context. The second question of this study cannot be answered without a certain context. Since many of the papers written in WKU are argumentative essays, it is reasonable for students to use logical connections and conjunctions as marked themes. Nevertheless, sometimes students make wrong use of them because of various reasons. This study has figured out that the most frequently used marked theme in WKU student writings is logical connector “however”; the second popular marked theme is the conjunction “and” as well as the logical connector “because”; the supposition “if” ranks the third. Among all those marked themes, the most overused ones are logical connectors. In all six student essays, “however” is the most frequently overused; “because” and “and” rank the second; “if” ranks the third. After analyzing the contexts of the papers, the reasons why WKU students overuse marked themes can be: (1) L1 influence; (2) the students do not possess good logic; (3) influenced by oral English; (4) lack of lexicon. The misuse of marked themes mainly due to these reasons: (1) wrong understanding of the logic; (2) false grammar or spelling; (3) improper use of intensity; (4) inappropriate use of examples.

This study sits in a Sino-US environment, which is significantly different from traditional Chinese universities mainly due to the language of instruction and the teaching style. WKU is the first Sino-US university in China, thus the statistic is very unique and can make an empirical contribution to the literature. However, no published research has examined the use of marked themes in Sino-British universities. The results might be slightly different from that of this study because British education style is different from American teaching atmosphere.

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