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On Textual Theme in Reading Comprehension of English Romantic and Criminal Short Stories

Elnaz Ghaleasad¹

Islamic Azad University, Iran

Abstract

Short stories are woven into every stage and minutiae of life, and every one comes across reading stories. In reading and comprehending stories, textual theme plays very important role. However, little was known about the role of textual theme for reading comprehension of narratives and literary texts, especially short stories. The present study, therefore, investigated textual them in reading comprehension of English criminal and romantic short stories. Applying Hallidayan categorization of textual theme (1985, 1994), five criminal and five romantic short stories in English were analyzed in order to determine possible differences in the textual organization of these stories. The study concluded that there were similarities across stories. These similarities were attributed to the same genre family. Moreover, the results confirmed that the knowledge of textual metafunction, particularly with narratives and expository texts including short stories, is an effective resource for efforts to improve reading comprehension of stories.

Key Words: *theme, rheme, textual theme, reading comprehension, short story*

¹ Elnaz Ghaleasad, Islamic Azad University, Iran [E-mail: elnaz.ghaleasadi@yahoo.com](mailto:elnaz.ghaleasadi@yahoo.com)

Introduction

Short stories are the most widely studied family of genres, and are read and told by all social groups and in all cultural contexts in the world. Martin and Rose (2007, p. 49) state that “stories are central genres in all cultures”. Among stories, criminal and romantic short stories have attracted the attention of most people especially adolescent and young people, and every one comes across reading stories.

As Pinnacchio (2007) argues, “reading is a substantial component of any given curriculum, and many students, including native and non-native students, are always faced with writing as well as reading stories”. Whittaker (1995) claims that “reading is an interactive process with the reader bringing different kinds of knowledge and expectations to the text. Therefore, in order to improve reading skills, readers or students need to be aware of organizational patterns of text in stories”. In reading stories, textual organization has a considerable importance in understanding, interpreting, comprehending as well as reading these narratives. Textual themes, as stated by McCabe (1999), are links which specify the relationship of a clause to the surrounding text and context. According to Halliday (1994), “textual theme includes continuatives, structural theme and conjunctive adjuncts”. Also Matthysen (1995) states that “textual meta-function orients towards the realm of meaning”.

Over the last years, textual theme has been of great interest for many researchers in the analysis of various texts (Ghadessy, 1995; Jalilifar, 2009, McCabe, 1999; Whittaker, 1995). However, researchers have paid much less attention to this construct in various texts, especially in stories, and its possible usefulness in second language reading. Martin and Rose (2007) conducted genre analysis on stories in English. They investigated various types of stories in terms of textual organization and text structure. They concluded that each story type has the same genre, and they refer to this genre as the ‘story family’ of which news story, anecdotes and narratives are its members.

Whittaker (1995) analyzed economics and linguistics academic articles and she found roughly 15% of the sentences in each set of texts to contain a textual theme. She attributed this greater use in these texts to the fact that they had a larger portion of argument as opposed to exposition and that density of textual theme may be one mark of argument.

Therefore, considering the importance of textual theme in texts as well as stories and the lack of comparative studies in this area, the aim of this study is to analyze English romantic and criminal short stories in terms of textual theme in order to see the differences and similarities between them and also to investigate the effect of textual theme on reading comprehension. Moreover, it tends to find answers to the following question: (1) What types of textual theme are used in English romantic short stories? (2) What types of textual theme are used in English criminal short stories? (3) Are there any differences between English romantic and criminal short stories in terms of textual organization?

Methodology

Text Selection

The corpus used in this study was selected from five romantic stories and five criminal stories in English. The selection was done with the aim of building a corpus representative of English criminal and romantic short stories. The rationale for the selection of these stories was five folds: 1) They were written by famous story writers and read by many people; 2) they were representative of the criminal and romantic subgenres; 3) these stories were available on the internet and accessible to the researcher; 4) according to Martin and Rose (2007, p. 49), “stories are written all over the world, and they are considered as the central genre in all cultures. Also, they have the power of attracting the adults as well as children attention” and 5) Erkaya (2005, p.1) states that “short stories help students learn and reinforce language skills”

Instrument

The instrument used for analyzing and comparing the materials was Halliday's (1985, 1994) classification of textual theme (conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts and continuatives). Textual theme, as suggested by Halliday (1985, 1994), includes:

- a) continuatives that are a small set of items such as *yes, no, well, oh, now*, which signal that a new move is beginning;
- (b) a structural theme that is one of the obligatorily thematic elements such as conjunctions (either co-ordinators such as *and, but, yet* or subordinators such as *when, because, since*), and relatives (either definite such as *whichever, whatever, however*);

(c) a conjunctive theme that is one of the conjunctive adjuncts e.g. *on the other hand, in any case, in other words*.

The rationale for the selection of above mentioned categorization of theme is that, according to Martinez (2003, p.108), “the textual theme constitutes a key for understanding sentence construction from a thematic perspective”. Also, as stated by McCabe (1999), “the textual theme specifies the relationship of the clause to the surrounding text and context”.

Procedure

In order to conduct the study, five romantic short stories and five criminal short stories in English were collected. Since access to electronic versions was easier, work was carried on the electronic versions of English texts. Moreover, these stories were authentic and original, and they were among popular stories written by famous writers such as Doyle (2003), Jenkinson (2001), McFalls (2004), Stoker (2001). In order to control the author's preference or style, these stories represented a variety of authors. Also, to minimize the threat of reliability in the analysis, the stories were analyzed by an experienced researcher in applied linguistics, and agreement was made on the method of analysis. In addition, in order to ensure that the length of these stories are equal quantitatively, they were scanned and converted into Rich Text Format, and word count was run on them. Afterwards, the data was carefully read and analyzed in order to determine textual theme types.

The choice of unit of analysis for this study was the independent conjoinable clause complex. This is also referred to as "T-unit" by many analysts and researchers (Berry, 1995; Coulthard, 1994; Cummings, 1995; Fries, 1995, 1983; McCabe, 1999; North, 2005; Ventola, 1995). McCabe (1999, p. 73) believes that the optimal unit of analysis is the independent conjoinable clause complex, namely T-unit. Also, Coulthard (1994, p. 230) believes that "the theme of a t-unit provides a framework within which the rheme of the t-unit can be interpreted". Therefore, this was the unit analyzed consistently throughout this study.

Finally, the results of the analysis were announced in terms of the frequencies and percentage of textual theme in English criminal and romantic short stories. Next, chi-square test was employed to compare and contrast the obtained frequencies to see the statistically significant differences. In sum, the data were analyzed using the statistic software SPSS (statistics package for social sciences).

Results

Considering t-unit as the unit of analysis, the researcher calculated the number of words and t-units in short stories. The data presented in the following table shows the information on the number of words and t-units.

Table 1.

Word counts and T-units in English criminal and romantic short stories

Short Stories	S1 (T-unit)	S2 (T-unit)	S3 (T-unit)	S4 (T-unit)	S5 (T-unit)	Total (T-unit)
English Criminal	6758 (594)	6497 (609)	6228 (480)	4957 (377)	7036 (511)	31476 (2571)
English Romantic	6720 (550)	6285 (660)	6414 (531)	6302 (532)	6195 (625)	31916 (2898)

Textual themes

The corpus was analyzed for the frequency and percentage of textual theme in terms of conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts, and continuatives. It was found out that in both corpora, criminal and romantic short stories, conjunctions and coordinators were more prevalent than conjunctive adjuncts and continuatives. English authors showed comparatively great inclination for conjunctions and coordinators. At any rate, these differences are not so much great, and these relative similarities can be attributed to the nature of both genres. The over-use of conjunctions in both corpora can be attributed to the place of conjunctions and conjunctive adjuncts in the clause. Since, as Halliday (1994) states, conjunctive adjuncts are not necessarily thematic, they may occur elsewhere in the clause whereas conjunctions are obligatory initial.

In addition, textual theme occurred in higher frequency in criminal short stories. This showed that the reader could make links between clauses more easily by specifying the relationship of the clause to the surrounding text.

In the present study, it was found out that the percentage of conjunctive adjuncts was identical in both corpora. Moreover, as the results showed, continuatives appeared in higher percentage in criminal short stories, and this shows that criminal short story writers explicitly signal that a new move is beginning in the stories such as a new dialogue between the characters or speakers of the stories. Again the differences can be attributed to the nature of story genre. The following table demonstrates the frequency and percentage of textual themes in English criminal and romantic short stories.

Table 2.

Frequency and percentage of textual themes in English criminal and romantic short stories

Short Stories	Conjunction (%)	Conjunctive adjunct (%)	Continuative (%)	Total
English Criminal	803 (31.23)	74 (2.87)	95 (3.69)	972 (37.80)
English Romantic	718 (24.77)	77 (2.65)	72 (2.48)	867 (29.91)

Chi-square statistics in textual theme

The following table shows chi-square statistics where X^2 stands for chi-square amount, df shows degree of freedom, and S refers to level of significance.

Table 3.

Results of Chi-square test for English romantic and criminal short stories

Theme types	Total words	Total t-units	Total themes (%)	X^2	df	S
Textual in English Criminal	31476	2571	972 37.80	0.007	1	0.93
Textual in English romantic	31916	2898	867 29.91			

As it is shown, the critical value of X^2 with 1 degree of freedom was 3.84 for 0.05 level of significance. Since the values of chi-square obtained for different types of themes were less than 3.84, and the obtained value of significance was greater than 0.05, it was concluded that the differences were not meaningful. In other words, there were no significant differences between English criminal and romantic short stories in terms of textual theme.

Discussion

In the present study, the analysis of romantic and criminal short stories in English revealed a number of important points with regard to research questions. The results of chi-square test showed that there was no significant difference between English romantic and criminal short stories in terms of textual theme. This shows that these short stories belong to the same genre, and that the authors of these short stories follow the acceptable generic patterns as revealed in these short stories. In this case, Martin and Rose (2007, p. 49) believe that “stories are the most widely studied family of genres, and they consider the stories as central genres in all cultures”. Also, they claim that each story type has the same genre, and they refer to this genre as the 'story family' of which narratives, anecdotes, as well as the analyzed short stories of the present study are its members.

The analysis of English criminal and romantic short stories showed that different types of textual theme such as conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts and continuatives have been used in these stories. Therefore, it can be claimed that these short stories represent the same genre in terms of different types of themes. In addition, textual organization, in English romantic and criminal short stories, helps the cohesiveness of these stories and has a crucial bearing in organization of ideas in these stories.

Halliday and Hassan (1985, p. 46) believe that “texts belonging to the same genre represent a similar contextual configuration, that is, they show common characteristics in terms of field, mode, and tenor of discourse”. Therefore, these short stories, presenting the same family of genre, have similar characteristics in terms of field, mode, and tenor of discourse. According to Halliday and Hassan (1985), the field of discourse recognized in the culture refers to the kind of activities such as happenings and events in these stories, and can predict experiential meaning, while tenor of discourse involved in the creation of texts refers to participants such as characters or interaction of their roles in these stories and can predict interpersonal meaning. In addition, mode of discourse associated with the rhetorical channel refers to the parts, particular functions, as well as the channel including spoken or written language and can predict textual meaning. In other words, field, tenor, and mode of discourse are realized in topical, interpersonal, and textual meanings.

In this case, theme is considered as one of the textual choices that provide interesting insights in establishing similarities within and between genres. Moreover, an interesting point is that, the writers of criminal stories used textual themes to a greater extent than the writers of romantic stories. In this way, by choosing the textual features, writers help readers to follow the organization of events in these stories. This type of intervention by the writers turns out to be a feature of stories. In addition, these thematic choices by writers help readers in interpreting, understanding, as well as reading short stories, and it provides a base to help readers to be aware of the generic nature of stories. Also by providing textual information, the writers intervene to influence the readers of the stories. Therefore, in reading short stories, familiarity with genre

plays an important role in interpreting these stories. So the researcher argues that textual organization has an important role in reading and comprehending stories, and influences the reader's comprehension of short stories. Whittaker (1995, p.107) claims that reading has more to offer in the support of the importance of theme types in text as well as story comprehension, and the more readers know of the conventions of genre, the better they will understand and comprehend the text including short stories.

Moreover, as stated by Whittaker (1995), this kind of information helps the reader to follow the organization of texts. Also this type of theme gives information about the organization of events happening in these stories, and expresses logical relations between the ideas and events. For instance, by using *but* as a logical connector, the writer prepares the reader for a change in the direction of events and happenings in the story.

In English criminal and romantic short stories, the most frequent type of textual theme was conjunctions. Totally the frequency of conjunctions was more in English criminal stories, that is, English criminal short stories show more tendencies to use connectors and conjunctions in their texts. McCabe (1999, p. 217) states that “coordinators and conjunctions are used mainly to reinforce the relationships that is often explicit lexically”. Also McCabe (1999, p. 217) points out that this logical lexical relationship in English picks up something already mentioned in a previous clause, and thus adds content to the mental schema which the reader builds of the text. Therefore, one characteristic of criminal stories is the reader's ability to make logical relations between ideas presented in the stories and relate them to preceding ideas. In addition, North (2005, p. 436) suggests that “conjunctions indicate the relationship of a clause to a preceding text, and also provide more explicit guidance to the reader in construing a coherent interpreting of the text”. Therefore, it can be claimed that, due to high frequency of coordinators and conjunctions in English criminal short stories, the reader can easily decode the organization of events happening in the stories by making logical relations explicitly which have a linking or connecting function, while in romantic stories, the relations are not explicit, so textual themes are not so prevalent in these stories.

The stories were also similar in terms of conjunctive adjuncts. McCabe (1999, p. 217) states that “conjunctive adjuncts, like conjunctions, express the logical relationships between ideas; moreover, conjunctive ties tell the reader how the writer relates the information in one clause to that given in a previous clause”. Also Halliday (1994, p. 50) believes that “conjunctive adjuncts are different from conjunctions in that they set up a semantic relationship with what proceeds, while conjunctions set up a relationship that is not only semantic but also grammatical”. Therefore, it is important to mention that conjunctions are more important in not only reading and comprehending these stories but also in cohesion of the texts in short stories. Note the following example from the story of *The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton* by Doyle (2003):

(1) I've had to do with fifty murderers in my career, but the worst of them never gave me the repulsion which I have for this fellow. And yet I can't get out of doing business with him.

Another type of textual theme was continuatives. The results showed that continuatives revealed a relatively identical frequency in English and Persian corpora. One of the interesting points in analyzing short stories was that continuatives were revealed in the examples of colloquial language of the participants and characters of these

stories. Note the following example from the story of *My one Great Love* by Gardiner (1997):

(2) "It likely wouldn't be much," I countered.

"Well, it sounds like a good opportunity," my Dad said.

"Oh, I know, Dad," I answered. "I've thought about that."

According to Halliday (1994, p. 92), "continuatives are discourse signalers showing a new move is beginning in speech, or they show a movement to the next point". Therefore, continuatives are signalers of spoken discourse rather than written discourse. Moreover, according to Halliday (1985, 1994), the continuatives do not express a speech action and have no place in mood structure.

Conclusion

By analyzing criminal and romantic short stories in English, this study revealed that different types of textual theme were used in these short stories. The most interesting point was that the overall results of the present study confirmed similarities with respect to textual theme in both short stories. Therefore, it was concluded that these short stories represent the same family genre as a whole. Thus, the results of this study provided support for genre influence on theme choice. In addition, since these stories had the same genre, they also showed similarities in terms of field, mode, and tenor of discourse in terms of textual and contextual features.

Moreover, in both corpora, the higher frequency of connectors and conjunctions than conjunctive adjuncts and continuatives, indicates that readers can make logical relationship between the events, and in this way, they can decode the information easily.

Finally, it can be concluded that textual theme establishes cohesion and coherence in text and textual cohesion and coherence are important means to guide reading comprehension. This knowledge is necessary, and it can help students overcome blindness and confusion of text and grasp the structure of discourse clues so that it enhances the level of reading comprehension.

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