

Ecological Discourse Analysis based on Theme System

-- Taking Xi Jinping's Important Speeches at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation as an Example

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ABSTRACT

Based on the textual function of Systemic Functional Linguistics, this study employs the theme system to conduct an ecological discourse analysis of Xi Jinping's important speeches at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. The aim is to explore the ecological sense of the selected text and further validate the practical value of He and Ma's extension of the theme system in ecological discourse analysis from the perspective of ecolinguistics. The findings reveal that the markedness of participant role themes effectively highlights the ecological attributes of clauses. In the discourse, participant roles of social factors often serve as themes, with various ecological factors alternating, reflecting the diversity and interactivity of these roles. This underscores the broad participation and cooperation across the globe under the Belt and Road Initiative, further illustrating China's steadfast commitment and contributions to advancing high-quality Belt and Road cooperation. Consequently, the discourse demonstrates a strong ecological orientation and is therefore regarded as ecologically beneficial.

KEYWORDS

Theme System; Ecological Discourse Analysis; Ecolinguistics.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the study of ecolinguistics has made great strides both domestically and internationally, leading to a deeper understanding of its research areas. Ecolinguistics is grounded in a naturalized and realist philosophy of science (Steffensen & Fill, 2014). Huang (2016) further explains that ecolinguistics is an interdisciplinary field combining ecology and linguistics, and it is a relatively new branch of linguistics developed in recent decades. Two main paradigms are included in ecolinguistics, namely the Haugen model (Haugen, 1972) and the Halliday model (Halliday, 1990). The former primarily examines the interaction between any given language and its environment, while the latter focuses on the implications of language use for the environment. Also, Alexander and Stibbe (2014) point out that ecolinguistics is the examination of how language influences the life-sustaining relationships between humans, other species, and the physical environment. It is normatively directed towards the preservation of relationships that support life. Considering this definition, the scope of ecolinguistics extends far beyond the analysis of texts specifically focused on environmental or ecological issues. Instead, its focus encompasses all discourses that have the potential to influence behavior in ways that either harm or preserve ecological systems.

Many scholars have conducted researches on ecological discourse analysis using Systemic Functional Linguistics as the theoretical framework, primarily focusing on systems such as transitivity, modality,

and register. Hong and Yuan (2024) examined the rhetorical features, transitivity processes, and ecological value orientations of public signs for environmental protection under the guidance of the concept of ecological civilization. Miao and Liu (2023) carried out an ecological discourse analysis of climate change-related news in *People's Daily* by using the transitivity system as the theoretical framework, aiming to explore how climate change is portrayed in the news discourse. Cao and Zhao (2021) employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze modality resources in emotional network discourse on Sina Weibo, using the modality system as the theoretical framework. Dong (2021) analyzed aspects such as register, genre, transitivity, and the attitudinal system to investigate the extent of alignment between beneficial discourses and "Awareness of Conservation." In addition, some studies have mentioned the theme system within Systemic Functional Linguistics during the analysis of the selected corpus, but the exploration has not been adequately in-depth. Xu and Gao (2023) explored diplomatic English discourse on ecological civilization by integrating corpus linguistics and ecological discourse analysis, focusing on three dimensions: ideational meaning, interpersonal meaning, and textual meaning. Under the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics, Pan and Yuan (2022) conducted an ecolinguistic analysis of a poem, with a focus on its mood and modality, transitivity system, and theme system. The research object in Liu and Wang's (2019) study is also a poem, which they examined through the dimensions of transitivity, mood, modality, appraisal, thematic structure, and the information system.

The review of existing research on ecological discourse analysis reveals that although numerous scholars have endeavored to conduct ecological discourse analysis from the perspective of Systemic Functional Linguistics, studies focusing specifically on ecological orientation through the theme system remain relatively scarce. Within the framework of ecolinguistics, the theme serves as the point of departure in discourse, typically representing universally accepted or implicit background information. As such, the selection of theme in describing the interaction between human beings and other ecological components in human living places can reflect diverse ecological orientations (He & Zhang, 2017). Consequently, this paper seeks to analyze the selected corpus through the theme system to uncover the ecological sense of discourse and provide empirical support for the analysis of ecological orientation in discourse on the basis of textual function.

2. AN ANALYSIS OF THEMATIC STRUCTURE FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF ECOLINGUISTICS

2.1. Classification of Participant Role Themes

Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:89) claim that the theme, which serves as the point of departure of the message, locates and orients the clause within its context. It generally consists of familiar or given information mentioned in the text, or knowledge shared by both participants in the communication. The remainder of the clause, referred to as the rheme, conveys unfamiliar or new information the speaker aims to transmit, indicating the progression of the clause beyond its initial point. In general, the speaker selects the theme as the starting point to direct the addressee in interpreting the message. By foregrounding part of the message as the theme, the speaker facilitates the addressee's comprehension.

In view of the representational function of the clause, the theme includes topical, interpersonal and textual themes. The theme of a clause ends with the first constituent, which can be a participant, circumstance, or process, and is referred to as the topical theme. However, there may be other elements in the clause that precede the topical theme. These elements act as a textual or interpersonal function and do not contribute to the experiential meaning of the clause, being named as textual theme or interpersonal theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:105-107). According to the semantic components of the themes, it can be divided into two categories: simple theme and multiple theme (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:93). A simple theme contains only topical elements and excludes

interpersonal or textual elements, whereas a multiple theme includes not only topical elements but may also incorporate interpersonal and textual elements. Furthermore, Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:97) state that themes can be classified into unmarked and marked based on whether they conflate with the subject. An unmarked theme is an element that occupies the theme position of the clause and conflates with the grammatical subject, while a marked theme is an element other than the subject placed in the theme position, without conflating with the grammatical subject. Typically, an unmarked theme is used as the point of the beginning of the message in a clause, which is commonly labeled as a nominal group or a subject. Nevertheless, the speaker may select a marked theme to emphasize particular information, which is generally realized through an adverbial group. He and Ma (2020) argue that recognizing the marked theme in ecological discourse analysis is of significant importance. It helps interpret how and why certain ecological factors are foregrounded in a clause, revealing the ecological orientations implicit in the speaker's mindset.

From the perspective of ecolinguistics, He and Ma (2020) extended the division of theme. For declarative and interrogative clauses, the theme is extended to the first participant role of the clause. For imperative clauses, the theme is extended to the process element. Participant role themes are categorized into living and non-living organisms. The living organism participants are divided into human and non-human participants, each of which can be further classified into individual (PR-individual: PR_{ind} / PR-individual nonhuman organism: PR_{indnho}) and group (PR-group: PR_{grp} / PR-group nonhuman organism: PR_{grpnho}) categories. The non-living organism participants are classified into social factors (PR-social factor: PR_{soc}) and physical factors (PR-physical factor: PR_{phy}). The study will adopt this framework to conduct a detailed categorization of participant role themes.

2.2. Criteria for Assessing the Ecological Attributes of Participant Role Themes

He and Ma (2020) point out that in discourse concerning natural ecosystems, the speaker should prioritize non-human ecological factors by selecting non-human organisms and physical factors as topical themes. The more frequently such topical themes are used, the stronger the ecological sense of the discourse becomes. In discourse concerning social ecosystems, the ecological sense of the discourse is influenced by the diversity and interaction of participant role themes. The greater the variety of participant roles serving as topical themes, the stronger the ecological sense of the discourse. In contrast, when a single participant role, particularly one representing the speaker's stance, predominates as the topical theme, the ecological sense of the discourse weakens. Additionally, the alternation of participant roles as themes enhances the ecological sense of the discourse, while the consistent use of a single participant role diminishes it.

The markedness of the theme can highlight certain ecological factors within discourse, as framed by ecolinguistics, thereby conveying the intention of the speaker. By analyzing the markedness of the theme, the ecological attributes are assessed in both natural and social ecological discourse. In declarative and interrogative clauses in both Chinese and English, the subject is the most common participant role placed at the beginning of the clause, serving as the unmarked theme. Complement participant roles are less frequently found at the clause-initial position and function as marked themes. In imperative clauses in both languages, the predicate or main verb is the most common topical constituent at the beginning of the sentence, acting as the unmarked theme; only when the addressee is emphasized does the subject appear at the start of the clause as a marked theme. In natural ecological discourse, selecting non-human organisms or physical factors with stronger ecological attributes as marked themes emphasizes the speaker's concern for other ecological factors in nature, thereby enhancing the ecological sense of the discourse. Conversely, selecting human participant roles or social factors with weaker ecological attributes as marked themes, focusing on human beings or human activities, weakens the ecological sense of the discourse. In social ecological discourse, the alternation of different participant roles as themes indicates the speaker's attention to a broad range of ecological factors, thus strengthening the ecological sense of the discourse. If, in this case, participant roles with strong ecological attributes are chosen as marked themes, the discourse's

ecological orientation is reinforced. However, when a single participant role is consistently used as the theme, reflecting the speaker's narrow focus on a particular person or event, the ecological sense of the discourse weakens. Moreover, if marked themes come from participant roles with weaker ecological attributes in this situation, the ecological sense of the discourse is further diminished (He and Ma, 2020).

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1. Research Questions

Within the framework of the theme system, the aim of this study is to conduct ecological discourse analysis of the selected samples in order to shed light on the ecological sense of the discourse. In line with the research objective, the following research questions are listed as follows:

- 1) How does the selected discourse embody the ecological attributes through the theme system?
- 2) What kind of ecological sense does the selected discourse convey?

3.2. Data Collection

The data for the present research are derived from Xi Jinping's important speeches at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation, published in 2017, comprising a total of 11 keynote speeches. First, the samples from this discourse are analyzed to categorize the participant roles. Second, the participant roles are classified into unmarked and marked themes in accordance with the theme system. Finally, the ecological sense of the selected discourse is evaluated based on the criteria for assessing the ecological attributes of participant role themes.

3.3. Research Method

The present study employs textual analysis, meticulously examining each speech to identify participant roles in the theme position within the clauses. After identifying the participant roles, they are classified into unmarked and marked themes. Unmarked themes typically follow the standard word order in the clause, while marked themes deviate from this order to emphasize thematic significance. Subsequently, the ecological sense of the discourse is assessed by analyzing how the themes, particularly the participant roles, embody ecological attributes.

4. THE APPLICATION OF THEME SYSTEM TO ECOLOGICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

4.1. An Analysis of Participant Roles as Unmarked Themes

As mentioned above, the ecological attributes of participant role theme are primarily influenced by the diversity and interactivity of the participant roles. The stronger the ecological attributes of the participant roles, the stronger the ecological sense of the selected discourse will be. The following examples will illustrate this point.

Example 1: China(PR_{soc}) has reached practical cooperation agreements ... These agreements(PR_{soc}) cover not only projects of hardware connectivity... but also software connectivity... The agreements(PR_{soc}) also include plans and projects for cooperation in economy ... The Chinese railway authorities(PR_{soc}) will sign agreements ...to deepen cooperation...services. We(PR_{grp}) will work to launch ...deliver early benefits.

(Xi Jinping, 2017,p.88)

Regarding the choice of themes, instead of selecting a single participant role to consecutively serve as the unmarked theme, participant roles of social factors are primarily used in this example, such as "China," "These agreements," and "The Chinese railway authorities", which alternate as unmarked themes. This suggests that the discourse is more ecologically oriented.

In this example, the word "China" is used as the information focus of the clause, acting as the unmarked theme to highlight the practical outcomes of China's cooperation in promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, and underscoring China's important role in international cooperation. The "agreements" mentioned in the first clause is in the position of rheme, which is used as an unmarked theme in the second clause, providing a detailed explanation of the areas covered by the cooperative agreement, highlighting the diversity of both hardware and software connections, and reflecting the broad scope of cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative. The third clause continues to emphasize the importance of the "agreements" by stating that the areas involved are not only limited to infrastructure construction but also extend to the economy, trade, industry, etc., showcasing the multi-dimensional cooperation framework of the initiative. In the fourth clause, "the Chinese railway authorities" is used as an unmarked theme, indicating concrete cooperative actions and emphasizing the deepening of the cooperation between China and Europe on regular railway cargo services. In the final sentence of the paragraph, the participant role of group "we" is used as an unmarked theme, where "we" represents the Chinese government and its relevant departments, reflecting the expectation of the cooperation project, while emphasizing the government's intention and determination.

To summarize, the unmarked themes in this example represent China's actions and decisions, thereby demonstrating its leading role in the Belt and Road Initiative. The frequent use of "agreements" as the unmarked themes highlights the significance of cooperation within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative, particularly since the agreements cover a variety of fields, reflecting China's comprehensive plan to build a closer partnership in connectivity. This paragraph conveys an optimistic vision of global cooperation, thus making it a discourse of ecological benefit.

Example 2: The Belt and Road Initiative (PR_{soc}) is rooted in the ancient Silk Road. It (PR_{soc}) focuses on the Asian, European and African countries, but is also open to all other countries. All countries (PR_{soc}), from either Asia, Europe, Africa or the Americas, can be international cooperation partners of the Belt and Road Initiative. The pursuit of this initiative (PR_{soc}) is based on extensive consultation and its benefits will be shared by us all.

(Xi Jinping, 2017,p.91)

In this example, all four unmarked themes are in a prominent position, each represented by participant roles. Various participant roles of social factors serve as unmarked themes, such as "The Belt and Road Initiative" and "All countries," demonstrating the diversity of participant roles. In terms of the interactivity of the participant roles, different types alternate as the themes of each clause, indicating a strong ecological attribute of the discourse.

The first clause begins with "The Belt and Road Initiative" as the unmarked theme, providing a profound historical context that traces its origin to the ancient Silk Road. This historical connection reinforces the Belt and Road Initiative as a symbol of global economic and cultural ties. In the second clause, the unmarked theme "It" continues to refer to the Belt and Road Initiative, describing its regional scope and openness. It emphasizes that the initiative is not confined to a specific region but is open to the participation of countries worldwide. The third clause further broadens the scope of participation in the initiative, stressing its global and inclusive nature. The final sentence underscores that the Belt and Road Initiative will be implemented on the basis of extensive consultation and cooperation, with the outcomes being shared by all participating countries. And the mention of "consultation" and "benefits shared by us all" in the rheme position of the clause reinforces the idea of win-win cooperation, reflecting the initiative's commitment to multilateralism and mutual benefit.

In conclusion, the unmarked themes in this example are participant roles of social factors, rather than individual participant roles that reflect the speaker's personal stance. This reflects a position at the national level, with the discourse conveying the value of promoting international cooperation and common development, thus constituting ecologically beneficial discourse.

Example 3: I (PR_{ind}) am pleased to note ... More than 100 countries and international organizations (PR_{soc}) participate in it. A large number of cooperation projects (PR_{soc}) have been launched... An interconnected infrastructural network (PR_{soc}) is taking shape. Industrial cooperation (PR_{soc}) is gaining momentum. Policy coordination (PR_{soc}) is improving. People (PR_{grp}) are beginning to reap the benefits of Belt and Road cooperation, and feel even closer to each other.

(Xi Jinping, 2017,p.99)

This example contains seven unmarked themes, mostly represented by participant roles of social factors. Specific descriptions of cooperation alternate as unmarked themes, suggesting that the example offers a detailed explanation of the current status of the Belt and Road Initiative from various perspectives. It showcases the all-round mutually beneficial cooperation and reflects the key roles of various countries and international organizations within the initiative.

In the first sentence, the participant role of individual "I" serves as the unmarked theme, expressing the speaker's personal emotions and indicating the positive response and widespread support of the global community for the Belt and Road Initiative. The unmarked theme of the second sentence refers to "More than 100 countries and international organizations," conveying the fact that the initiative has received broad participation and support. In the third sentence, "A large number of cooperation projects" is used as the unmarked theme, describing the development and current operation of the cooperation projects, highlighting the extensive implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative in practice. The fourth sentence further describes the progress made in infrastructure development under the initiative, indicating that relevant projects are gradually taking shape. In the fifth sentence, the unmarked theme "industrial cooperation" demonstrates the positive development of the Belt and Road Initiative in terms of industrial cooperation and conveys the message that cooperation is gaining momentum. The sixth sentence emphasizes the gradual improvement in policy coordination, reflecting the deepening collaboration among countries at the policy level. Finally, the example concludes by using the participant role of group "people" as the unmarked theme, emphasizing the benefits that the Belt and Road Initiative brings to the people and expressing the fact that the relationship between the people of various countries has become closer. Additionally, by highlighting the feelings of the people, the discourse shifts the focus to the improvement in ordinary people's lives and the emotional ties between countries.

In summary, the unmarked themes in this example emphasize the progress made by the Belt and Road Initiative in practice, conveying the theme of global cooperation and development, and highlighting the goal of interconnection and shared development. In the final part, by using "people" as the unmarked theme, the focus shifts to the feelings of the general public, reflecting the dual interaction between the national and individual levels. This suggests that the Belt and Road Initiative is not only a framework for intergovernmental cooperation but also one that involves the interests of the public. Overall, this example conveys the positive message that the Belt and Road Initiative promotes cooperation on a global scale, emphasizing the common progress of countries, the benefits to the people, and the interconnectivity achieved through cooperation. Therefore, this discourse exhibits a strong ecological sense.

4.2. An Analysis of Participant Roles as Marked Themes

Compared to unmarked themes, marked themes foreground ecological factors by placing other elements of the process at the beginning of the sentence to achieve a specific purpose. The discourse becomes more eco-oriented when different types of participant roles alternate as marked themes, as demonstrated in the following examples.

Example 4: From the historical perspective, mankind (PR_{ind}) has reached an age of great progress... In this increasingly multi-polar, economically globalized, digitized and culturally diversified world, the trend toward peace and development (PR_{soc}) becomes stronger, and reform and innovation (PR_{soc}) are gaining momentum. Never have we (PR_{grp}) seen such close interdependence among countries ... and never have we (PR_{grp}) had so many means to prevail over difficulties.

(Xi Jinping, 2017,p.77)

In this example, certain elements, such as a circumstantial role representing time rather than the subject, are placed in the initial position of the clause, highlighting and foregrounding the information. This placement emphasizes the diversity of the modern world and the trend of global cooperation, reflecting the interdependence among nations and the shared progress of humanity.

In the first sentence, the theme extends from a circumstantial role to the participant role of individual. From a historical perspective, humanity has undergone significant progress and transformation, with the term “mankind”, regarded as a whole, highlighting its pivotal role in the historical process. In the second sentence, a prepositional phrase functions as an adjunct, modifying the main clause and emphasizing the context or environment in which the action occurs. Through the participant roles of social factors, such as "the trend toward peace and development" and "reform and innovation" as themes, the sentence illustrates positive development trends in the context of globalization and multi-polarization. In the final sentence, the participant role of group "we" serves as the theme, with the negative word "never" placed at the beginning of the sentence. The inversion emphasizes the role of the human community and highlights the collective sense and shared consciousness of humanity. This unconventional word order underscores the interdependence between countries, the pursuit of a better life, and humanity's capacity to overcome challenges.

This example includes various participant roles and presents multiple trends and changes from different perspectives within the context of globalization, emphasizing the diversity of the modern world and the trend of global cooperation. In addition, it reflects the joint efforts of humanity in peace and development, reform and innovation, conveying a positive attitude toward cooperation, and facing challenges together in the global context. From the analysis above, it is evident that the ecological attributes of the participant roles are stronger in this example, thereby making the ecological benefit information in the discourse more prominent.

Example 5: Under the current situation, the issue (PR_{soc}) we must seriously address is how we should work in a spirit of partnership, how we can coordinate and synergize our macro policies and development strategies more effectively ... so that the mutual complementarity of our development strategies can guide and drive our economic cooperation.

(Xi Jinping, 2017,p.105)

Compared to the unmarked theme, the choice of "the issue we must seriously address" deviates from conventional word order, foregrounding the term "the issue". This arrangement shifts the focus to elaborating on the specific content of the issue that needs to be addressed in the position of the rheme. It can be seen that this deviation from the usual sentence structure underscores the importance of the issue itself, drawing attention to it before exploring the details of the solution.

In this example, the sentence first uses a circumstantial role as a marked theme to capture the reader's attention. The theme then shifts to the participant role of social factor "the issue," which is the focus of the clause, representing the core problems that need to be resolved in cooperation. Solving this issue involves interactions between nations or organizations, and the subsequent clause will elaborate on this foregrounded information. The participant role of group "we" is used several times in the place of rheme, referring to the parties involved in the cooperation (e.g., countries or organizations). Through questions like "how we should work" and "how we can coordinate and synergize," the discourse reflects on the concrete ways of cooperation and coordination, indicating that all parties need to work together to achieve the goal.

By posing questions such as how to cooperate within partnerships and how to coordinate and synergize the macro policies and development strategies of different parties, the discourse highlights the necessity of cooperation among countries or organizations in the context of globalization. It also suggests that the mutual interests of all parties can be maximized through coordination and complementarity. Based on the analysis above, it is clear that this example selects participant roles with strong ecological attributes as the marked theme, thus making the discourse more ecologically oriented.

5. CONCLUSION

This study draws upon the theme system to examine the ecological sense of the research object—Xi Jinping’s important speeches at the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation. By analyzing the participant roles in the selected examples and classifying them into marked and unmarked themes, the research demonstrates that the discourse exhibits a strong ecological sense. Specifically, different participant roles of social factors frequently serve as themes in the clauses, reflecting the goal of global cooperation and sustainable development for the benefits of the people under the Belt and Road Initiative. Notably, the use of marked themes emphasizes the multi-level participation of different countries and regions in the initiative, highlighting the interaction and co-existence of ecological factors within the ecosystem. Furthermore, the discourse illustrates how the Belt and Road Initiative has generated new opportunities for global cooperation and development, facilitating mutual benefits between China and the participating countries. The analysis confirms that the selected discourse qualifies as ecologically beneficial. Finally, this study further substantiates the practical value of the theme system for analyzing the ecological sense of discourse from the perspective of ecolinguistics and provides a novel methodological approach for ecological discourse analysis.

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