

INTERPRETING THE READABILITY IN SIMPLIFIED EDITIONS OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FROM A THEMATIC PERSPECTIVE: A CASE STUDY ON *ALICE'S ADVENTURES IN WONDERLAND*

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First received: 27 February 2017

Final Proof Received: 28 May 2017

Abstract

Readability formulas developed on the foundation of the structuralist approach have been proven capable of providing satisfactory indexes about the readability in most cases, but cannot explain "causes of difficulty or... how to write readably" (Klare, 1974, p. 62). This paper will explore the thematic structure under the framework of Systemic Functional Linguistics as an explanation perspective for the achievement of readability in simplified editions of children's literature. The study is based on a comparison between the original and two simplified editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in terms of Theme composition and Theme status, respectively. The two adaptations have provided explicit conjunctions and an explicit identity chain, respectively, as the major tool to assist young readers with reading. Green (1865) has foregrounded the tactic relationship between clauses by adding Textual Theme back to the clause and by revising the clausal order in complexes. Swan (1988) has omitted most Textual Themes either on purpose or along with the deletion of plots, and rewritten marked Themes into unmarked, modifying the development of text into a linear pattern and converging the clausal order in text towards that in spoken language.

Keywords: readability; children's literature; thematic perspective; systemic functional linguistics

The concept of readability describes the matching degree between a piece of material and target readers' knowledge, with a focus on their linguistic resources (Gilliand, 1972). The higher the matching degree is, the more readable the material will be. Readability formulas (cf. Flesch, 1943, 1948; Dale & Chall, 1948; Farr, Jenkins, & Paterson, 1951) developed on the foundation of the structuralist approach throughout the mid and late 20th century have been proven capable of providing satisfactory indexes about the readability in most situations (Klare, 1974). The shorter the word/sentence length is, the higher the formula score will be, and the easier the material to follow. However, due to the exclusive focus on the micro-structure under the sentence, parameters like word length, sentence length, or noun frequency cannot indicate "causes of difficulty or... how to write readably" (Klare, 1974, p. 62). Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is thus applied to this domain and expected to contribute to both questions (e.g. Yan, 2009).

This paper will compare different writing strategies adopted in three editions of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (AAW) from a thematic viewpoint under SFL theory. With the appreciation for precise indexes produced by formulas, this paper attempts to provide a linguistic explanation for the achievement of readability indicated by these scores. The case study will be conducted in terms of Theme composition and Theme status, analyzing the

complexity and the markedness of Themes in the text respectively.

In Hallidayan terms of SFL, Theme is "the point of departure of the message which locates and orients the clause within its context" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, p. 89). The message unfolds from thematic prominence (i.e. Theme) to thematic non-prominence (i.e. Rheme). The choice of what information to be at the thematic position is meaningful as the speaker can manipulate the development pattern of text through it (Fries, 1995).

METHOD

This study is based on a corpus of three editions of AAW, the original (Carroll, 1865), Green's edition (Green, 1865) and Swan's adaptation (Swan, 1988), which are consistent in field, tenor, mode. To control the variable of field, a working corpus of Chapter One "Down the Rabbit-Hole" in three editions has been set up, as that is the chapter with the largest consistency in plot among three editions. To minimize the difference in tenor, the three editions are all created by native speakers in English, and introduced into China without any further adaptation. Both simplified editions have been estimated by Chinese editors that they should match English abilities of middle school students in China at the age between 12 and 15 years old. And this has been clarified on the book cover of both editions. It matches the age range of readers targeted

by the original edition since the story was first told by Carroll to three little girls aged at 8 to 13 (Sloan, 2007). In terms of mode, the three editions are all in written English.

The original edition is scored at 80.4 in Flesch's Reading Ease formula (Flesch, 1943, 1948), followed by Green's (84.6) and Swan's (94.7) adaptations. The lower the score is, the more difficult the text will be for target readers. So, the original and Swan's editions are the most difficult and the easiest to follow respectively.

FINDINGS

Theme composition: The complexity of Themes

Themes are categorized into simple, multiple, and clausal in terms of the component. Simple Theme is a single structural element realized by a nominal group (e.g. *Alice (T) waited till the eyes appeared.*), an adverbial group (e.g. *Suddenly (T) she saw a table.*) or a prepositional phrase (e.g. *From door to door, (T) she begged for money.*). Alternatively, it can be realized by a group/phrase complex constituting a single element at the thematic position. For instance,

|| *The King*, (nominal group 1) *the Queen* (nominal group 2) *and* (structural) *Alice* (nominal group 3) (T) *were in custody.*||

The simple Theme *The King, the Queen, and Alice* is construed with a nominal group complex which consists of three simple nominal groups linked by the structural/conjunction *and*. The structure realizes the single function of Participant in the relational process. In AAW, most simple Themes are realized by nominal groups, including common/proper names like *Alice, the Queen* and *the Cheshire Cat* and pronouns like *she, it, and that*.

Multiple Theme is constituted of more than one component in one of these structures: Textual ^ Experiential, Interpersonal ^ Experiential, or Textual ^ Interpersonal ^ Experiential. Textual Theme can be any combination of continuative (cont), structural (stru), and conjunctive (conj) in that order. Interpersonal Theme can be any combination of modal, vocative (voc), and Finite in that order. Whereas it is allowed to involve all seven components in one multiple Theme, in most cases, it is realized by only two to three. Few instances in AAW are constituted of four components or more. For example,

|| *But Alice* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *had nothing to read.*||

|| *O Mouse, do you* [Interpersonal (voc ^ Finite) ^ Experiential (topical)] *know the way out of this pool?*||

|| *Or do bats* [Textual (stru) ^ Interpersonal (Finite) ^ Experiential (topical)] *eat cats?*||

|| *and sometimes* “*Do bats* [Textual (stru) ^ Interpersonal (modal ^ Finite) ^ Experiential (topical)] *eat cats?*”||

Clausal Theme only occurs when a dependent clause is at the thematic position and regarded as the Theme of the whole clause complex (see Analysis version 1). Alternatively, the clause complex is treated as a combination of two Theme-Rheme structures realized in each clause respectively. The multiple Theme of the dependent clause is then construed in the structure of Textual ^ Experiential. And the major clause is of the simple Theme *I* construed by a simple nominal group (see Analysis version 2). This paper follows the first version of analysis. Clausal Theme is rare in AAW, as it will foreground the various tactic relationships between clauses and complicate the development pattern of text.

|| *Even if I fall off the top of the house,*(T)|| *I shall be far behind.*|| (Analysis version 1)

|| *Even if I* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *fall off the top of the house,*|| *I* [Experiential (topical)] *shall be far behind.*|| (Analysis version 2)

Minor and elliptical clauses without thematic structure, such as *O, Mouse!*, *Of course!* and *Good night!*, have been excluded from the analysis. Green (1865) and Swan (1988) have adopted some classic strategies in simplification, such as deleting plots and shortening sentences, so that the decline of the total number of clauses encounters with the increase of the readability score based on the word and sentence length (see Table 1).

Green (1865) and Swan (1988) also have rewritten multiple and clausal Themes into simple ones. The percentage of simple Theme thus is not significantly influenced by the decreasing number of clauses in Green's edition, but overwhelmingly increased in Swan's edition. With the repetition of simple Theme like *Alice* and *she*, the text unfolds in a linear pattern with an explicit identity chain. For example,

|| *Alice started to her feet,*|| *for it* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *flashed across her mind* [[*that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it.*]]|| (Carroll, 1865, p. 10)

|| *It* [Experiential (topical)] *had flashed into her mind* [[*that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat pocket or a watch to take out of it.*]]|| (Green, 1865, p. 2)

The clausal clause complex embedded with a projected clause is rewritten into a clause embedded with the projected clause. The multiple Theme *for it* is rewritten into simple Them *It*. The clausal

relationship then becomes implicit in Green's edition.

|| *Either the well* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *was very deep*|| *or she* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *fell very slowly,* || *for she*

[Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *had plenty of time*|| *as she* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *went down to look about her, and to wonder* [[*what was going to happen next.*]]|| (Carroll, 1865, p. 12)

Table 1: Comparison of three editions in terms of Theme composition

	Carroll (1865) [80.4]	Green (1865) [84.6]	Swan (1988) [94.7]
Simple Theme	81 (38.8%)	68 (37.2%)	89 (61.4%)
Multiple Theme	93 (44.5%)	83 (45.4%)	41 (28.3%)
Clausal Theme	20 (9.5%)	22 (12.0%)	2 (1.4%)
Total Clause	209	183	145
Minor Clause	3	1	9
Elliptical Clause	12	9	4

|| *She* [Experiential (topical)] *was not falling quickly.*|| *She* [Experiential (topical)] *had time to wonder*|| "*What's going to happen next?*"|| (Swan, 1988, p. 10)

The first four clauses in the original edition are realized by multiple Themes in the same structure of Textual ^ Experiential. Swan (1988) adapted the complex into two simple clauses with Subject *She* at the thematic position. The repeated use of this strategy has resulted in the overwhelming increase in the proportion of simple Theme in the adaptation. As the most common mood of clauses is declarative, simple Theme in Swan's edition is then typically realized by a simple nominal group such as *she, it, or Alice.*

Apart from these similar strategies, Green (1865) also rewrote simple Theme into multiple or even clausal Theme. She has added omitted components back to the thematic structure, making the implicit conjunctions explicit, and reversed the clausal order in clause complexes to modify the unfolding of the information flow into a linear pattern. For instance,

|| *I* [Experiential (topical)] *wouldn't say anything about it,*|| *even if I* [Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical)] *fell off the top of the house!*|| (Carroll, 1865, p. 12)

|| *Even if I fall off the top of the house* (T)|| *I shall say nothing about it.*|| (Green, 1865, p. 3)

The periodicity in both clause complexes above is scoped from the dependent clause over the major clause. With the revision of the clausal order, the unfolding pattern of the written information converges to that in spoken language, which is easier to follow by young readers.

Green's (1865) strategy of making the implicit conjunctions explicit is also indicated by the increase in the percentage of Textual ^ Experiential in her edition (see Table 2). Swan (1988) on the other hand has sacrificed the tactic relationship for the readability by deleting Textual Themes from multiple Theme structure, which explains both the decrease in the percentage of Textual ^ Experiential

and the surge in the percentage of Interpersonal ^ Experiential. The latter is achieved by deleting Textual Theme from the Textual ^ Interpersonal ^ Experiential structure. In doing so, together with other strategies like simplifying multiple Themes into simple ones, Swan (1988) has converged the development of text towards the linear pattern and spoken style. Most Interpersonal Themes in AAW are Finite and therefore cannot be omitted.

Theme status: The markedness of Themes

Theme status describes the markedness of Theme in relation to the mood of clauses. In declarative, the unmarked Theme is Subject typically realized by a nominal group (e.g. *Alice* (T) *was now only ten inches high.*). A marked Theme is then "something other than the Subject" (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p. 73). For instance, *After a while,* (T) *Alice decided to drink it,* where the marked Theme is the circumstantial element.

A yes/no interrogative is typically signaled with a Finite in the Finite ^ Subject structure (e.g. "*Would you* (T) *like cats if you were me?*" *cried the Mouse.*). In WH-interrogatives, the unmarked Theme is the group/phrase containing the WH-element as it is the information that needs to be answered (e.g. "*What* (T) *is the use of a book?*" *Alice thought.*).

The function of the imperative is to call for actions. In positive imperative, when the request is targeted at both the speaker and the listener, the typical Theme is *let's* (e.g. *Let's* (T) *talk about it in detail.*). When the request is targeted at the listener, the unmarked Theme is the verb at the thematic position, such as *call* (T) *the first witness* and *write* (T) *that down.* The King and the Queen of Hearts are the two characters using positive imperative at most frequency in AAW, indicating their high status in court. In negative imperative, the unmarked Theme is *don't* ^ Predicator (e.g. *Don't talk* (T) *nonsense.*).

The unmarked Theme of an exclamative is the WH-element realized by a nominal or adverbial group, such as *What a curious feeling* (T) *it is* and *How brave* (T) *they'll all think me at home.* In a

dependent bound clause, if Finite, the typical Theme is construed in the combination of Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical) (e.g. *I think [[that it (T) would be four thousand miles down.]]*). The structural Theme is commonly realized by conjunctions like *because*, *that*, and *whether*. When the clause opens

with a WH-element, the WH-element is the unmarked Theme (e.g. *I know [[who (T) I was.]]*). If a dependent bound clause is non-Finite or merely of the Rheme, it is regarded as a marked Theme of the clause complex (e.g. *With all the doors being locked (T), we had no way in.*).

Table 2: Comparison of internal structures of multiple Themes in three editions

	Carroll (1865) [80.4]	Green (1865) [84.6]	Swan (1988) [94.7]
Textual^Experiential	74 (79.6%)	69 (83.1%)	29 (70.7%)
Interpersonal^Experiential	9 (9.7%)	6 (7.2%)	9 (22.0%)
Textual^Interpersonal^Experiential	10 (10.8%)	8 (9.6%)	3 (7.3%)
Total	93	83	41

Table 3: Comparison of Theme status in three editions

	Carroll 1865 (80.4)	Green 1865 (84.6)	Swan 1988 (94.7)
Marked Theme	27 (13.0%)	29 (15.8%)	3 (2.1%)
Unmarked Theme	167 (80.0%)	144 (78.7%)	129 (89.0%)
Total	209	183	145

Green (1865) has shown her respect to Carroll in the sense that she preserved most plots and linguistic features. The proportion of marked and unmarked Themes in her adaptation is therefore similar to that in the original edition. The drop in the percentage of marked Theme in Swan's edition (1988) is due to both the deletion of clauses while cutting off the plot and the simplification of marked Themes into unmarked. For instance,

// away went (T) Alice like the wind//
(Carroll, 1865, p. 14)

// away she (T) went after it like the wind//
(Green, 1865, p. 4)

// and she (T) ran very quickly after the White Rabbit// (Swan, 1988, p. 10)

The original Theme is realized by Predicator instead of Subject, and therefore marked. Green (1865) has reduced the reading difficulty by rewriting it into a combination of adverbial group ^ Subject. Though it is still marked, the process *she went after it* is modified to match the typical order of a declarative in spoken language in case young readers are confused with the position of the adverbial *away*. The disruption on the understanding of the plot and on the reading rhythm is hence diminished. Swan (1988) has further reduced the disruption and reading difficulty by rewriting the marked Theme into an unmarked, multiple Theme in the structure of Textual (stru) ^ Experiential (topical).

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the thematic structure as an explanation perspective for the achievement of readability in simplified editions of children's literature. The comparison between the original and two adaptations of AAW is conducted from

viewpoints of Theme composition and Theme status, respectively. Green (1865) and Swan (1988) have simplified the plot and linguistic features to a different extent with common adaptation strategies, such as limiting the diversity of vocabularies, deleting the plot, rewriting multiple and clausal Themes into simple ones, cutting clause complexes into clauses, shortening clauses and words, and revising the clausal order.

Apart from these similarities, the two adaptations are of different tools to assist young readers with reading. Green (1865) has provided explicit conjunctions to foreground the tactic relationship between clauses, making it easier to notice and follow by young readers. Specifically, she has added Textual Themes back to the clause, and reversed the clausal order to relocate the dependent clause at the thematic position. The tool provided by Swan (1988) for the improvement of readability is an explicit identity chain realized by the repetition of Subject which is an unmarked, simple Theme in most cases. The adapter has sacrificed the tactic relationship between clauses by simply deleting Textual Theme and foregrounding the identity chain by rewriting marked Themes into unmarked. Since the most common mood of clauses in AAW is declarative, the simplified text typically unfolds with Subject *Alice*, *she*, and *it*. The development of text hence is converged towards a linear pattern.

FUNDING

The Postgraduate Research Support Scheme by the University of Sydney; The USYD-CSC Postgraduate Research Scholarship; The National Social Science Fund of China "A functional comparative study of the English/Chinese original literary works and their simplified versions" (Grant No. 15CYY008).

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