

# **TEXT AND TRANSLATION: THE ROLE OF THEME AND INFORMATION**

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## **1. Perspective**

Our understanding of text contributes to our grasp of the principles of translation, and translation, in turn, can be a powerful tool for elucidating the nature of text. Translation, if it is to capture the full meaning of a text, must take into account every thread of implication, with its relative weight understood both within the message itself and, beyond that, against the backdrop of the entire tapestry of communicative systems in the source language. And then, once all the nuances have been grasped, each shading of the message must thereupon be recaptured in a totally different set of systems with all proportions kept. So daunting indeed is this task that translation has been called "probably the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos" (Richards 1953:250).

The challenge of translation brings to the fore the intricacies of pragmatic relations that go beyond syntax and semantics. Pragmatic phenomena are constantly being evaluated as the translator seeks to penetrate the full meaning of a message. The exercise of teasing out these many subtle relations and then synthesizing them in another language requires, at some level, an understanding of the regular processes that generate them.

Valuable perspective, both for the understanding of text in general and for insight into the translation process, is offered by a functional model in which separate and independently variable systems account for the different phenomena of language, including the organization of text at the discourse level. In such a model, each system is defined by the function that it serves, and each function yields meaning in a different sense. Or put another way, function defines the system, and meaning flows from the function.

This view of language has been advanced by M.A.K. Halliday, whose functional grammar (1967-1968, updated in 1985), with its separate textual component, provides the framework for the present discussion.

## 2. The Textual Component

Halliday defines his textual component as "the grammar which specifies the choices that speakers and writers make when they introduce structures into discourse" (1967:50). He has also called it the grammar of messages. It creates the fabric of text through two systems that are separately variable but at the same time highly interdependent: (1) the theme system, which establishes points of departure for the organization of each message unit<sup>1</sup> within the text, and (2) the information system, which regulates the delivery of new information in discourse.

The theme and information systems are essential to the organization of discourse, and they play out their respective functions in every message unit. The theme system provides the link that spans the distance between the thought in the speaker or writer's mind and the expression of that thought as the onset of a message (Trávníček 1962). It is the mechanism that "sets the stage" and propels the entire text forward. It does this by introducing into the discourse the first element of each unit. It may refer to previous information in the discourse, to the situational context, or to a thought in the speaker or writer's mind. The information system, in turn, specifies the functional structure whereby new information is introduced into the discourse and each unit builds up to its focus of newest information. Speakers and writers, because they want to be understood, present new information in incremental chunks that attach to what they believe to be existing nodes in the knowledge base of the addressee (Clark & Haviland 1977). The decisions they make result in an information structure that helps to ensure successful communication.

### 2.1 Theme and Information in Tandem

Working together, this dyad of theme and information give identity to the message unit. They also provide the warp and the woof into which the cohesive ties of the larger textual fabric are woven.

Theme and information may be said to represent the respective voices of the two participants in discourse--the first person ('I') and the second person ('you'). Theme corresponds to the voice of the speaker or writer, while information represents that of the listener or reader--the voice, still inside the speaker, that strives to be meaningful to the addressee, based on shared experiences in a given community. The two roles are inherent in all communication. Their expression in text is crucial to its ultimate realization.

## 2.2 Reflexes in Spoken and Written Text

The unfolding of text in terms of theme and information transcends the distinction between speaking and writing, since the principles are shared by both forms of expression (Halliday & Hasan 1976:325; Quirk et al. 1972:937-938; Vasconcellos 1985, chs. 1, 5-7). And in fact, it may be precisely in these terms that the differences between the two modes of language can be explained most tellingly.

What appears to be the case is that spoken discourse emphasizes information, whereas writing tends to be more thematic. Oral discourse is propelled forward on the basis of *you-ness*: speakers regulate the delivery of new information with more attention to expected, imagined, or actual responses from their audience, especially when it is a single listener. As a result, newness builds up recursively, with adjustments and corrections in course as the speaker responds to feedback, real or perceived. In writing, on the other hand, with the interlocutor absent, authors draw on inward thoughts for the stimulus to move their text forward. More often than in speaking, they will introduce secondary themes, with tangential thoughts starting new embeddings, before they get to the final resolution of the message unit. The result is greater syntactic complexity, which requires close attention on the part of readers (see Cook 1975 on readability assessment). The differences between the thematic and the informational viewpoint--*me-ness* versus *you-ness*--would appear to account for Chafe's (1982) well-known criteria of integration-fragmentation and detachmentinvolvement at a more underlying level.

## 3. Thematic Structure

According to Trávníček, the theme is always the first element in the message unit regardless of its syntactic function. Every message unit has a theme, and it occurs, by definition, in initial position.

There is importance to the fact that a given element is chosen by a speaker or a writer to serve as the onset, and hence the theme, of a message unit. At the beginning of a text, the theme is what starts the ball rolling. In later message units it usually refers to something that has already been mentioned in the preceding discourse, in which case it establishes a cohesive tie. The speaker or writer may also use a theme that presupposes a speech act (Givón 1979:50-67) or invokes some other knowledge or feeling outside the cognitive context of the discourse.

Typically, when the theme refers to a specific referent--in other words a person, place, or thing in the cognitive world of the text--it will be expressed as a noun. In the simplest case, it is a single word or phrase

corresponding to the first slot in the pattern for the standard declarative sentence. In English this would be the subject:

- (1) Fred saw "The Phantom of the Opera."<sup>1</sup>

The theme can also be an adverbial phrase, some other discourse adjunct, or a conjunction:

- (2) Yesterday Fred saw "The Phantom of the Opera." Today he's going to see "Funny Girl."

- (3) Finally Fred saw "The Phantom of the Opera." He'd been trying to get tickets for months.

- (4) Fred went to see "The Phantom of the Opera." Either that or "Funny Girl."

It can also be the key signature that introduces a non-declarative construction:

- (5) Where did he see "The Phantom of the Opera"?

It is interesting to see how the whole perspective changes depending on the kind of theme. In (2) the spotlight shifts away from 'Fred' and creates a setting in which chronology becomes important. 'Finally' is used in the cognitive sense of 'at long last' in (3). It can also have a non-cognitive sense in which it merely serves to organize the discourse. In (4), 'Either' sets the stage for a contrast with the preceding unit. And in (5) the fact that a question is being framed becomes paramount. In one way or another, all these different themes set the stage and launch the development of the unit.

In addition, the theme can be a verb, which brings up the whole problem of capturing theme and information structure in translation, to be discussed later below in detail.

The theme can also be quite long:

- (6) At the newly renovated Pantages Theater is where he saw it.

And two or more themes can be stacked:

- (7) Fred had waited for months. But<sub>1</sub> finally<sub>2</sub> last night<sub>3</sub>, at the newly renovated Pantages Theater<sub>4</sub>, he got to see "The Phantom of the Opera."

The top of the stack is at the left, and the stacking follows predictable patterns (Vasconcellos 1985: chs. 6-7). As more themes are added to the left, they become more related to the organization of the discourse itself (internal, non-cognitive), while those on the right are more related to the world-knowledge (external, cognitive) content of the message (Halliday 1967).

Always, the common defining characteristic of the theme is that it expresses the relationship to what is uppermost in the speaker or writer's mind. And always the expression of this relationship is an important part of the meaning of the message.

In translation, full thematic meaning can only be captured by retaining in roughly the same order at the beginning of the message unit all the same components of meaning--situational, presuppositional, interpersonal, logical, cognitive, semantic, and any other kinds of meaning that had been expressed by themes in the original text.

#### 4. Information Structure

Whereas the theme system initiates the message unit, the information system brings it to a close. In the normal (unmarked) situation, closure occurs upon the delivery of newest information. The two systems together create the boundaries of the unit.

The patterning of information in alternating waves of given and new is primeval. Givón (1979) traces it back to the time in evolution when creatures first began to move under their own volition (346). To protect themselves and find food, they had to develop the ability to distinguish familiar tokens versus new sensory input from the environment toward which they were headed. Discrimination between given and new depends on having a context of givens against which to make that judgment. In order for one to be distinguished from the other, there must be a contrast, and hence they must alternate. The essence of communication is the alternation of given and new. Moreover, there is a natural pace to this alternation, dictated by how many tokens of new information a creature can process in a single stretch (William James 1890). It is this phenomenon of alternating old and new information that gives pattern and meter to the structure of discourse.

With the information system, each message unit builds to the presentation of a focus of newest information. Typically, the focus comes at the end of the message unit. When it does not, i.e. when it is marked because of interaction with the logical component of the grammar, it is said to be contrastive. For example:

(8) Fred saw the *play*, not the movie.

As with the theme, the meaning of focus is expressed through its place at the end of the message unit. In translation, therefore, the focus must remain in its final position if its focal meaning is to be preserved.

### 5. Constraints on the Translation of Theme and Information

Problems often arise in translation as a result of the fact that the functional structure established through the theme and information systems cannot be preserved in the target language within the syntactic framework inspired by the source text. This is not surprising, because syntax is language-specific, whereas theme and information are universal. Dik (1980), in fact, has proposed that theme and information define a language-independent preferred order of constituents (LIPOC). If this order is to be respected in translation in the face of syntactic pressure to the contrary, then syntax has to yield: the translated elements must necessarily assume syntactic roles that are different from those of their counterparts in the original text.

This becomes a problem for the translation of Portuguese to English because English has a strong preference for the syntactic order subject-verb-object (SVO), whereas Portuguese not only permits the verb-(subject)-object (VSO) order but in fact has many of the characteristics of a VSO-dominant language (Pontes 1980, Vasconcellos 1985).<sup>2</sup> Thus, in the following example the thematically faithful construction *'came to me buttons'*, which was natural in Portuguese, is unacceptable in English:

(9-P)<sup>3</sup> A falta de objetivo me sofocava. Implorei a Deus com fé um caminho, uma causa. Vieram-me os botões. (Otto Lara Resende, *Braço Direito*, 1963)

(9-G) #the lack of objective me suffocated# #I-pleaded to God with faith [for] a path, a cause# #Came-to-me the buttons#

The syntactic equivalent in English would of course be *'Buttons came to me'*. One senses intuitively, however, that this is weak, and the reason is that it goes counter to the original flow of information: the focus of information *'buttons'* is shifted to the theme slot; the theme *'came'* is downgraded to the least salient position in the message; and *'me'*, the most readily inferred and therefore the least dispensable element in the entire unit, stands as the focus of new information. Thus we have: *Buttons came to me'*.

Faced with this conflict between syntax and the functional

came to me' and opted instead for an entirely different syntactic construction that was thematically and informationally faithful:

(9-E) A lack of objective was suffocating me. I prayed to God for an aim in life. And what I got was buttons.

This excellent solution preserves the theme and thus the link to the preceding unit. The theme 'what I got' manages to bracket the whole meaning of the previous unit and then goes on to propel the discourse forward by saying, in effect, 'the answer [to my prayer] was: X'. The 'And' serves to strengthen the link even more.

So it would appear that the functional structure of theme and information is in fact sensed by translators and that, in order to respect it, they sometimes discard the syntactic framework inspired by the source language.

To find out more about how professional translators deal with syntactic constraints when it comes to carrying over theme and information from source to target, a study was undertaken of 32 published translations in English of well-known Brazilian works, 16 of them fiction and 16 of them non-fiction (Vasconcellos 1985).

## 6. The Theme in Translation

The analysis showed that a great many factors affected the rendition of Portuguese themes in English. The main problem, encountered in nearly half the message units (46.1%), was the fronted verb--the famous V(S)O word order. Seven different kinds of thematic verbs were identified:

	% of all units	% of initial verbs
Verbs with:		
Fully specified subject, postposed	7.9	17.1
Subject implicit in the inflection	8.0	17.3
Subject inferrible from the discourse	16.0	34.7
Impersonal <i>se</i> , no specified subject	1.2	2.5
No specified subject	6.8	14.9

## Verbs occurring as part of:

Initial dependent clause	3.4	7.4
Negation, question, or command	2.8	6.1
TOTAL	46.1	100.0

The type that posed the most problems for the preservation of thematic structure was the so-called presentational verb with its postposed modal subject. For students of this VSO construction, including Hatcher (1956) and Suñer (1982) among others, the dethematized subject is seen to take on objectlike characteristics--an interpretation that is confirmed by case grammar analysis, in which the postposed subject typically corresponds to the semantic role of object (Aid 1973). Suñer regards such a verb as "the tray on which the delicacy is presented... (126)." In example 10 the verb *predomina* serves up an entire banquet:

(10-P) Na vertente do Pacífico, <sub>1</sub> predomina, <sub>2</sub> agressiva, a linha vertical, com as cumiadas e os picos dos Andes, entestando com as nuvens, num contraste violento com a paisagem oriental de terras altas, chapadas, chapadões e serras, que ondulando para leste, numa elevação média inferior a mil metros, se empinam a quase 3 mil metros, somente nas montanhas da cordilheira marítima (o Itatiaia, na Mantiqueira e o Pico da Bandeira na Serra do Caparaó, em Minas), para caírem, espreguiçando-se ao sul na vastidão interminável dos campos e das planuras. (Fernando de Azevedo, *A Cultura Brasileira*, 1944)

(10-G) #on-the slope of-the Pacific, <sub>1</sub> predominates, <sub>2</sub> aggressive, the line vertical, with the ridges and the peaks of the Andes...#

Constrained by the English requirement for a noun phrase in the initial slot, the translator moved the postposed subject in front of the verb and in so doing turned it into a theme and downgraded the original theme, now found in a later position in the unit:

(10-E) On the Pacific slope, <sub>1</sub> an aggressive vertical line predominates, <sub>2</sub> with the roofs and peaks of the Andes...

Still, in an intuitive effort to keep it near the beginning, the translator inserted the *predomina* after just a small segment of the lengthy subject, leaving the rest of the information flow intact. This was probably the best



that could have been done within the syntactic framework carried over from the source text. However, if the translator had taken greater liberty with the syntax, a more thematically faithful solution might have been found:

(10-E') The Pacific slope<sub>1</sub> is embossed<sub>2</sub> with an aggressive vertical line—ridges and peaks of the Andes...

Turning a thematic adverbial phrase or other adjunct into the grammatical subject is a widely used strategy among translators (Vasconcellos 1986a).

In another text, the same verb is again used to introduce a long series of postmodified characteristics:

(11-P) Nelas as perspectivas ilusórias se difundem; capricho sa ornamentação esconde e desmente as estruturas; predomina a composição aberta, o desenho assimétrico, os espaços indireccionais envolventes, as curvaturas contínuas e, finalmente, a crescente complexidade das soluções, propositadamente procurada para confundir o entendimento, dificultar a compreensão e enfatizar sua significação mítica. (Sylvio de Vasconcellos, *O Barroco*, 1974)

(11-G) #predominates the composition open, the design assymetric, the spaces undirected encompassing, the curvatures continuous, and...#

The thematic status of the verb is borne out by the fact that it does not agree syntactically with the compound subject that follows. The translator, with no introductory adjunct to enlist as the subject, was left with little recourse but to downgrade the presentational verb. Even so, however, the theme was inserted early in the series:

(11-E) In them, illusory perspective is suffused throughout; capricious ornamentation disguises and contradicts structures; open composition, assymetric design, undirected encompassing space, and + continuous curves predominate; and, finally, an increasing complexity of solutions is + purposely built up to confound understanding, hinder comprehension, and emphasize their own mythical significance.

In order to handle this inversion, the translator had to introduce new structures into the passage. A thematic rendition, on the other hand, would have made it possible to stay closer to the original information structure:

- (11-E') the predominant elements are open composition, assymetrical design, undirected encompassing space, continuous curves, and, finally, an increasing complexity of solutions purposely built up to confound understanding,...

The same text offered another similar example, but with the verb inflected for plural:

- (12-P) *Reaparecem nas peças os ângulos e as arestas vivas.* (Sylvio de Vasconcellos, 1974)

- (12-G) #reappear in-the furniture the angles and the sharp edges#

Here the translator reversed the theme and focus:

- (12-E) Angles and sharp edges came back.

With a little more thought, however, a thematic solution could have been found:

- (12-E') Once again furniture had angles and sharp edges.

This thematic rendition has the advantage, again, that it retains all the components of the original, including 'furniture'.

Just as challenging for the translators were verbal themes for which no subject was specified. These were of two types: a verb accompanied by the particle *se*, and a verb in third person singular inflection with no subject specified or retrievable from the text.

The *se*-construction, as seen in example 10, is often preceded by an adverbial phrase or adjunct which can sometimes be turned into a noun phrase. By applying this tactic, and by finding a resourceful rendition for *aprimorou-se*, the translator of example 13 was able to keep the entire unit in its original functional order:

- (13-P) *Nos colégios de padre,<sub>1</sub> aprimorou-se<sub>2</sub> o princípio de ser a meninice... idade teologicamente imunda.* (Gilberto Freyre, *Sobrados e Macumbos* 1936)

- (13-G) #in-the schools of priest,<sub>1</sub> refined-se<sub>2</sub> the principle of being childhood...[an] age theologically unclean#

- (13-E) The religious schools<sub>1</sub> stressed<sub>2</sub> the principle that childhood...was a foul age from the theological standpoint.

Instead of: 'In the religious schools<sub>1</sub> the principle that childhood...was a *foul age from the theological standpoint* was emphasized<sub>2</sub>'.

Perhaps even more difficult for translation is the verb in third person singular unaccompanied by *se* and for which no subject can be retrieved from the discourse--for example, *acontece* '[it] happens' or *resulta* '[it] results' used with a relative clause; *adianta* '[it] helps' or *basta* '[it] is enough' followed by an infinitive; *acaba* '[it] ends up' followed by a present participle, etc. The study yielded 262 occurrences of verbs of this kind (Vasconcellos 1986b:67-71). In example 14 the translator turned the thematic verb into a noun subject, but at the cost of shifting the focus of information away from final position:

(14-P) ; e<sub>1</sub> acaba<sub>2</sub> ratificando verdadeiros *tratados de paz* (Euclides da Cunha, *Os Sertões*, 1902)

(14-G) ; #and<sub>1</sub> ends up<sub>2</sub> ratifying real *treaties of peace*#

(14-E) [0]<sub>1</sub> The upshot<sub>2</sub> is that veritable *peace treaties* are signed.

Instead of: 'and<sub>1</sub> real *peace treaties* end up<sub>1</sub> being signed'.

The new theme creates such a strong link, in fact, that 'And<sub>1</sub>' is no longer needed.

The study showed that translation of the theme was complicated by many other factors as well. For example, the key signature for negation in Portuguese is clause-initial and imposes constraints in relation to the rest of the structure, creating patterns quite different from those for negation in English. Nevertheless, the translators sometimes found creative ways of capturing approximately the same thematic order:

(15-P) Não<sub>1</sub> o<sub>2</sub> entristecem<sub>3</sub> as cenas periódicas da *devastação e a miséria*. (Euclides da Cunha, 1902)

(15-G) #not<sub>1</sub> him<sub>2</sub> sadden<sub>3</sub> the scenes periodic of-the *devastation and the misery*#

(15-E) His<sub>2</sub> life<sub>+</sub> is not<sub>1</sub> saddened<sub>3</sub> by periodic scenes of *devastation and misery*.

Instead of: 'The *periodic scenes of devastation and misery* do not<sub>1</sub> sadden<sub>3</sub> him<sub>2</sub>'.

In this case the translator introduced the noun phrase 'his life' in order to have a subject available for 'sadden' and still preserve, as much as possible, the basic functional structure of theme and information. However, even though the order was maintained, the verb was dethematized.

Yet another problem for the translators in the study was the fully specified object complement preceding the verb--the OVS construction--in which the complement becomes the theme:

(16-P) E, obra de homens<sub>2</sub>, eram ainda as canoas feitas de *um só pau*.  
(Gilberto Freyre, Casa Grande e Senzala, 1933)

(16-G) #and<sub>1</sub> work of men<sub>2</sub> were still the canoes made of *a single log*#

(16-E) It was<sub>+</sub> the men<sub>2</sub>, also<sub>1</sub>, who made the canoes, fashioned out of *a single log*.

Instead of: 'The canoes, fashioned out of *a single log*, were<sub>1</sub> still men's work<sub>2</sub>'.

The translator, forced to use a different structure in English, opted for the predicated theme 'it was', which in this case matched the marked intent of the author and at the same time kept the thematic link near the beginning.

Another example:

(17-P) Ateuimento<sub>1</sub> não tinha, conhecia<sub>1</sub> o seu lugar. (Graciliano Ramos, Vidas Secas, 1938)

(17-G) #boldness<sub>1</sub> [he] not had# #[he] knew<sub>1</sub> the his place#

(17-E) He<sub>+</sub> wasn't the cheeky kind, he<sub>+</sub> knew<sub>1</sub> his place.

Here the translator was constrained both structurally and lexically. His solution, although it inverts the order of theme and information, is excellent because it captures both the register and the overall message in a nutshell. While the theme was lost, the gain in this case overrode the advantage of keeping the thematic material in initial position. This exception to the rule underscores the complexity of the translation task.

Yet another factor that showed up in the translation of the themes was the general freedom exercised in the handling of conjunctions, discourse markers, and other thematic adjuncts. Sometimes these themes were moved around in the translation, translated by a word with an entirely

different meaning, not translated at all, or introduced in the translation where they had not existed in the original. Such liberties can be seen in example 16 and in the following case:

(18-P) Com efeito,<sub>1</sub> em 'eu' e 'tu'<sub>2</sub>,...não<sub>3</sub> houve<sub>4</sub> propriamente *mudança funcional*; mas<sub>1</sub> outras duas formas portuguesas<sub>2</sub> representam uma subversão *das formas latinas*. (Joaquim Mattoso Câmara, *História e Cultura da Língua Portuguesa*, 1975)

(18-G) #indeed<sub>1</sub> in 'eu' and 'tu'<sub>2</sub>,...not<sub>3</sub> [there] was<sub>4</sub> properly *change functional*;# #but<sub>1</sub> the other two forms portuguese<sub>2</sub> represent a subversion of *the latin forms*#

(18-E) Although x 'eu' and 'tu'<sub>2</sub>,...did not<sub>3</sub> [0]<sub>4</sub> really *change in function*, [0]<sub>1</sub> the two remaining Portuguese forms<sub>2</sub> represent a total overhaul of *the Latin forms*.

A question that frequently came up in connection with translating both the theme and the information structure was the relative importance, from a functional perspective, of postmodifying material. English syntax, of course, normally forces such material to the left, and it is worth asking whether insistence on this structure in the target language in fact alters the staging and development of the message. The following example, in which the postmodification was retained, suggests that the position within the noun phrase is a nuance that is functionally meaningful:

(19-P) [No Brasil] patriarcal<sub>1</sub> o menino<sub>2</sub>...foi sempre criatura conservada a grande distância do homem. (Gilberto Freyre, *Sobrados e Macumbos*, 1936)

(19-G) #[in-the Brazil] patriarchal<sub>1</sub> the child<sub>2</sub>...was always creature kept at great distance from-the man#

(19-E) [In the Brazil] of patriarchal days<sub>1</sub> the child<sub>2</sub>... was always kept far from the man.#

Instead of: 'In patriarchal [Brazil]...

The foregoing illustrations just begin to point to the kinds of problems that the translators had to wrestle with: the fronted verb (examples 9-15), negation as a key signature (15), complement themes (16-17), the variable positioning of stacked conjunctions and discourse adjuncts

(15, 18), the relative bonding of elements within the noun phrase (19). Space has prevented exploration of a number of issues relating to the nature of the theme itself: the status of clitic pronouns, dependent clauses as themes, the extent of the theme in long units, the point at which the theme ends and the rheme begins, etc. (Vasconcellos 1985). In terms of the challenges for translation, there is the whole question of interaction with lexical constraints—i.e. the fact that the lexicon of the target language often fails to yield an exact semantic and syntactic match for the word in the source language.

An attempt to analyze and tabulate the many permutations of the Portuguese themes in the respective renderings in English would have led to a combinatorial explosion. There was no reasonable way of measuring fulfillment of the thematic intentions across the corpus as a whole. Thus, the study has been limited to identifying problem cases and pointing out some examples in which creative solutions were found, or failed to be found, in order to uphold the theme. The evidence suggests that thematic structure is recognized intuitively by translators but that at the same time they are strongly influenced by syntax. It also makes clear that they have many other important constraints to contend with.

## 7. Focus and Information Structure in Translation

The study of the 32 passages showed that information structure, like theme structure, was not always easy to transfer directly into the target language. Again, syntactic differences between Portuguese and English exerted pressure on the translator to present the build-up of information in an order different from the way it had evolved in the original source text. And again, the greater frequency of verb-initial constructions in Portuguese was at the bottom of some of the most challenging problems.

It has already been seen that 46.1% of the units in the corpus began with verbs instead of nouns. Just as this construction sometimes forced translators to downgrade the theme, it also caused the focus of new information to be shifted away from its natural position. Thus:

(20-P) Chegou<sub>1</sub> hoje<sub>2</sub> o meu vestido. (Alice Brant, *Minha Vida de Menina*, 1894)

(20-G) #arrived<sub>1</sub> today<sub>2</sub> the my dress#

(20-E) My dress came<sub>1</sub> today<sub>2</sub>.

The published translation moves the focus of new information to the position of theme, with the result that the focus is now the formerly subordinate 'today' and the thematic salience of the verb 'arrived' is lost.

In example 9 we saw a case in which the focus was retained as well as the theme:

(9-P) A falta de objetivo me sufocava. Implorei a Deus com fé um caminho, uma causa. Vieram-me os botões.

(9-E) A lack of objective was suffocating me. I prayed to God for an aim in life. And what I got was *buttons*.

Not only does the theme pick up from the previous unit, the fact that '*buttons*' is in focus position captures the original author's intentionally incongruous juxtaposition of '*buttons*' with the preceding focus, '*aim in life*'.

In another example of syntactic pressure from a fronted verb (different text, different translator) again the final focal material was kept in its natural position at the end:

(21-P) É quando se fundam [os primeiros povoados fixos] brasileiros. (Sylvio de Vasconcellos, 1974)

(21-G) #[it] is when se-found [the first settlements fixed] Brazilian#

(21-E) It was then that [the first villages] were founded in Brazil. Instead of: 'the [first [fixed]] Brazilian [villages] were founded'.

The study revealed far less variety in terms of types of focus than was the case with the theme. In the entire corpus there was one only instance of contrastive focus, the published translation of which was an exact parallel:

(22-P) Sim, esta não é uma prostituta. É a prostituta: um símbolo. (Erico Veríssimo, México, 1957)

(22-E) Yes, this is not a prostitute. She is *the* prostitute: a *symbol*.

What was most impressive was the high percentage of noun phrases in final focal position--an average of 81%. Among the more formal texts, one had 97.1% and two others had over 90%. However, the proportion of focal nouns tended to drop when the text was more

colloquial, especially in passages of constructed dialogue. The nouns in focal position provided closure; the verbs, on the other hand, seemed to leave the reader with the expectation of more to come. One feels like asking "And then what?" It is as if the focal verb has the force of a colon.

(23-P) Era assim que ele ia, o grande alienista, de um cabo a outro da vasta biblioteca, metido em si mesmo, estranho a todas as coisas que não fosse o tenebroso problema de patologia cerebral. Súbito, *parou*.

(Machado de Assis, *O Alienista*, 1882)

(23-E) And so the psychiatrist walked up and down his vast library, lost in thought, alien to everything but the dark problem of psychopathology. Suddenly he *stopped*.

As far as upholding the focus was concerned, there was an impressive correlation between the source and target texts. The focus was matched in the translations in 87.6 % of the message units, with little difference between nonfiction (86.6 %) and fiction (88.7 %). A number of the selections showed levels of more than 90%—four on the nonfiction side and 10 on the fiction side. The lowest, at considerable distance from all the others, 62 %, was for a translation in which much of the content had been heavily recast by the translator. If that selection is excluded, the average for the corpus goes up to 88.5 %.

One text of 314 working units (Sylvio de Vasconcellos, *O Barroco*, 1974) was the subject of special scrutiny. The translation upheld the focus in 271, or 86.3 %, of the units, which is very close to the 86.6 % overall average for the nonfiction side of the corpus.

This text was chosen for more detailed study of postmodification in unit-final noun phrases. The idea was to see the extent to which the focus of information corresponded to the entire noun phrase or only to the final postmodifying constituent, as evidenced by the solutions the translator had chosen.

In quite a few cases, the translator, instead of fronting the adjective to conform to English, changed the syntax so that the equivalent postmodifying material paralleled the original Portuguese order. In the following examples, the postposed adjective was turned into a phrase ending in a noun, at the same time satisfying the preference for a noun in focus position:



(24-P) ...ameaçados pelas [contestações] racionalistas.

(24-E) ...threatened by the [contestations] of rationalism.

Instead of: 'rationalist [contestations]'

(25-P) ...similares [realizações] francesas ou espanholas.

(25-E) ...similar [works] in France or Spain.

Instead of: 'French or Spanish [works]'

In example 26 the adjective is turned into a noun in English and the original noun becomes the adjective: <sup>4</sup>

(26-P) ...[o mouro] infiel.

(26-G) #...[the moor] unfaithful#

(26-E) ...[the Moorish] infidel.

In the next example, the focus could not be retained as a noun because of lexical constraints, but even so, the translator chose to override the preference for a noun phrase and keep the information in final position in the form of an adjective:

(27-P) As curvas começam a predominar sobre as retas.

(27-G) #the curves begin to predominate over the straight[-lines]#

(27-E) Curved lines gained over *straight*.

Example 28 also preserves the focus in the face of a lexical constraint, even at the expense of not having a noun phrase in final position:

(28-P) O vestuário exige complexa e cuidadosa *fatura*.

(28-G) #the clothing demands complex and careful *manufacture*#

(28-E) Clothing was complicated and *painstakingly made*.

The same principle also held in another type of construction in which normal English syntax would have again moved the focal information to a premodifying slot:

(29-P) A razão e a fé se haviam mantido [indissolúvelmente] ligadas.

(29-G) #the reason and the faith se-had maintained [indissolubly] linked#

(29-E) Reason and faith were [indissolubly] *one*.

Instead of: 'linked [indissolubly]'

On the other hand, in the following example the translator did not make any adjustment to keep the adjectival information at the end:

(30-P) ...polarizada pelos [retábulos] dourados.

(30-G) #...polarized by-the [alterpieces] gilded#

(30-E) ...reaching its height in the ornate gilded [alter pieces].

The translator added 'ornate', which was not in the original Portuguese, probably sensing the need to give more emphasis to the focal 'gilded' after it was downgraded. A version that preserves the focus--and incidentally also better captures the feel of the original text--would be:

(30-E') ...reaching its height in [alterpieces] encrusted with gold.

In contrast to all this, there were times when it did not seem necessary, or even desirable, to keep the information from the postmodifying adjective at the very end of the unit. The reason was that the noun-adjective construction was a "frozen phrase" in English, and as such perceived as a single semantic unit.<sup>5</sup> Examples in the text were:

(31-P) ...nos caminhos marítimos.

(31-E) ...with maritime trade routes.

(32-P) ...das cabeças coroadas e das ordens religiosas.

(32-E) ...from the crowned heads and the religious orders.

It is also possible that the adjective and the noun may contribute equal semantic weight to a concept that encompasses them both:

(33-P) ...pelo esforço coletivo.

(33-E) ...as joint community efforts.

(34-P) ...não se inclina a discussões metafísicas.

(34-E) ...was not given to metaphysical debates.

The study bore out the fact that violations of focus can be due to other constraints besides syntax. The most important was lack of parallelism between the lexicons of the two languages. There were also restrictions on acceptability. In the latter case, for example, it appeared

concept in unadorned final focus position:

(35-P) ...condenar o estilo como *bastardo*.

(35-G) #...condemn the style as *bastard*#

(35-E) ...condemn the Baroque as a *bastard* style.

(36-P) ...amplas saias-balão terminadas em apertados corpinhos que acentuam a exuberância *dos seios meio à mostra*.

(36-E) ...wide hoopskirts, topped by cinched waists, accentuated the exuberance of *half-revealed breasts*.

Less daring than: 'breasts half revealed'

From the above examples it can be seen that postmodifying adjectival material often plays a special focal role, reinforcing the thesis that there is a tendency to preserve the focus over and above the constraints of syntax. At the same time, however, it is also clear that other factors enter into determining the exact scope of the constituent that acts as the focus.

## 8. Conclusions

The study bore out numerous examples in which professional translators chose to preserve the original theme and focus despite the constraints of a different target-language syntax. At the same time, many other considerations--gaps in the lexicon, fusion of multiword concepts, differences in register, cultural differences, to cite but a few--were also part of the equation. The inevitability of countless "mismatches" at all levels, many of them impacting on the theme and information structure, raises the question of whether it is indeed possible to produce translations that are faithful to the overall structure of the discourse and the functional force of theme and information in individual message units. Perhaps it is not. Perhaps we should recognize that a translation will always be artificial text. Since syntax is language-specific, and since lexicons do not have perfectly matching inventories, the translator can never fully capture the meaning of all systems as expressed in the original language.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> According to the criteria adopted for the study, the message unit at the discourse level corresponds to the sentence (complete or incomplete) at the syntactic level. Halliday calls it the clause and defines it as "the non-embedded clause together with all clauses embedded within it" (1967:201). In the examples cited, when the end of the example coincides with the end of the message unit, a period is shown, even though the original text may have had some other continuation within the written sentence.

<sup>2</sup> In the examples, the theme is indicated in bold-face type and the focus is italicized. They are marked in this way when their status as theme or focus is relevant to the discussion. Stacked themes are numbered with subscripts from left to right. Themes introduced in translation are marked with a plus sign (+) and themes lost in translation have been indicated with a zero inside square brackets ([0]). Square brackets are used to separate the early part of the focal phrase from the final postmodifying constituent. The label (n-P) identifies the original Portuguese; (n-G), the gloss, when it is needed; (n-E), the published English translation; and (n-E'), a proposed alternative that is more faithful to theme and information.

<sup>3</sup> Of the 10 word-order conditions that define VSO-dominant languages (Greenberg 1966), Portuguese fulfills all 10 and English fulfills none of them. In addition, English and Portuguese both share three other characteristics that are usually associated with VSO-dominant languages (Vasconcellos 1985, appendix 4). Greenberg does not specify the degree to which the VSO pattern itself should be dominant. In the study reported here (Vasconcellos 1985), SVO was still the more frequent pattern in Portuguese, appearing in 52.6% of the independent clauses. A comparison with spoken data would be of interest.

<sup>4</sup> Both the original Portuguese and the English translation are well-known collocations. While the translator probably chose the collocation for that reason, it may also be that the parallelism reflects a sensitivity to focus that dates back in time.

<sup>5</sup> "Shop talk" and technical jargon in English tend to form fused units to refer to often-used concepts. Journalism has adopted this style because it is crisp and brief, but it has the disadvantage that the constructions can be difficult to process without the benefit of spoken prosody, and for readers who are not familiar with them they are difficult to understand—and often ambiguous.

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