

Applying Systemic Functional Linguistic to Instruct Students in Criminal Law Exercises

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ABSTRACT: Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), pioneered by Halliday, approaches language as a social semiotic system that serves communicative functions. Within SFL, Thematic Progression (TP) refers to how themes are developed across sentences to create coherence and cohesion in discourse. Structured argumentation and clarity are essential in legal education, particularly criminal law. At the People's Police College II (PPC II), students studying criminal law must enhance their writing skills for exercises, reports, and legal analyses. This paper highlights the role of Thematic Progression in guiding students to write more structured and logical legal texts.

This paper explores the application of Thematic Progression in SFL as a pedagogical tool to enhance cadets' case-solving and detailed case analysis skills at the PPC II in criminal law exercises. Thematic Progression, which involves the systematic development of themes within texts, plays a crucial role in structuring coherent and logical legal arguments. By analyzing different patterns of Thematic Progression, such as constant theme, linear theme, and split theme, students can improve their ability to construct well-organized legal discourse. This approach strengthens their comprehension of legal documents and aids in drafting clear and concise legal reports. The study provides practical guidelines for integrating Thematic Progression into criminal law exercises, fostering more effective communication skills among law enforcement cadets.

KEYWORDS: Criminal law exercises, People's Police College II (PPC II), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), Thematic Progression (TP).

1. INTRODUCTION

Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is a theory of language developed by linguist M.A.K. Halliday, with a profoundly sociological approach. Unlike traditional views that consider language a purely formal system, SFL views language as a set of choices with a communicative function in a specific social context. According to Halliday, language performs three basic meta-functions: ideational function, communicative function, and textual function. The ideational function allows language users to express their experiences of the surrounding world and their inner world; the communicative function helps to form and maintain social relationships through speech; meanwhile, the textual function creates coherence in speech, organizing information into a complete whole. Within the framework of text function, the concept of thematic progression (TP) appears as a key factor in ensuring coherence in discourse. Theme progression refers to the way the themes and rhemes of sentences in a paragraph are arranged and developed. In a sentence, the theme is usually the known or emphasized information at the beginning, while the rheme is the newly introduced information. When themes and rhemes are organized according to specific patterns, such as linear thematic progression, constant thematic progression, or split thematic progression, the text becomes easier to understand, thanks to the continuity in the flow of information. Therefore, TP plays an essential role in constructing academic texts, especially in specialized fields such as law, where accuracy, logic, and coherence are always prioritized. In legal discourse and criminal law exercises, thematic progression has a special meaning. Legal discourse is not simply presenting information but includes argumentation, proof, and explanation, linguistic activities requiring strict organization. An effective legal document needs correct content and must lead the reader along a clear and coherent line of thought. TP helps the writer better control the flow of information while avoiding common errors such as unnecessary repetition, or lack of logical connections between sentences and paragraphs. Applying TP in writing investigative reports, summaries of cases, or analyzing legal arguments will help improve the document's quality, increase persuasiveness, and respond professional requirements.



At the People's Police College II, cadets in a professional environment oriented towards serving the police industry, a field that requires proficient legal writing and argumentation skills. In the training program, they not only approach criminal law knowledge but also need to be familiar with writing genres such as case reports, scene records, reports, case summaries, or even analysis and assessment of specific legal situations. Teaching thematic progressions in this context will help cadets gradually form scientific writing thinking, know how to develop arguments from initial data, develop ideas in a logical sequence, and convey their views convincingly. At the same time, TP also supports students in drafting academic exercises according to standards, such as the IRAC model (problem - norm - application - conclusion), a popular writing framework in law training.

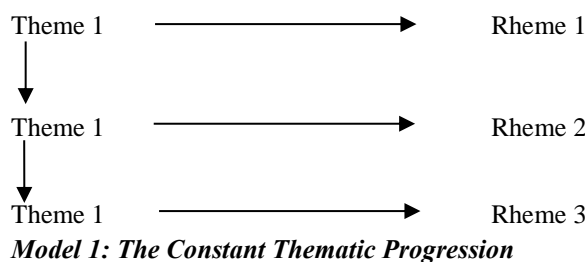
In short, systemic functional linguistics provides a comprehensive perspective on the role of language in social life, in which thematic progression is an essential tool for creating coherence in writing. In teaching legal academic writing to cadets at the PPC II, the application of TP not only brings practical results in learning but also contributes to improving professional capacity, helping students be ready to take on professional tasks after graduation. Therefore, TP should be considered an essential component in the legal writing skills training program for cadets.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Halliday (1994) defines the Theme as the starting point for a proposition, while the Proposition presents the rest of the message. The relationship between the Theme and the Proposition plays an essential role in maintaining the cohesion of the text. In contrast, the Theme progression ensures that information is introduced and organized, helping the reader or listener follow the discourse logically. Danes (1974), based on Halliday's theoretical framework, identifies three main models of Theme progression: Constant Theme Progression, Linear Theme Pattern Derived, and Derived Theme Progression.

2.1. The Constant Thematic Progression

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL), developed by Michael Halliday (1994), provides a framework for analyzing language in its social and functional context. One of the key aspects of discourse organization in SFL is the Thematic process, which plays a vital role in ensuring coherence and cohesion in texts. Among the different types of Thematic processes, the continuous Thematic process is critical because it maintains a stable Thematic focus throughout a discourse. The continuous Thematic process occurs when successive clauses maintain the same Thematic while introducing different Theories. This pattern reinforces a central Thematic or idea throughout the text, ensuring consistency and coherence. Structurally, the Constant Thematic Procession follows the pattern:



Example 1:

- The victim was found unconscious near the crime scene.
- The victim sustained multiple injuries on her arms and face.
- The victim was transported to the hospital by emergency services.

Theme 1
The victim
Theme 1
The victim
Theme 1
The victim

Rheme 1
was found unconscious near the crime scene.
Rheme 2
sustained multiple injuries on her arms and face.
Rheme 3
was transported to the hospital by emergency services.

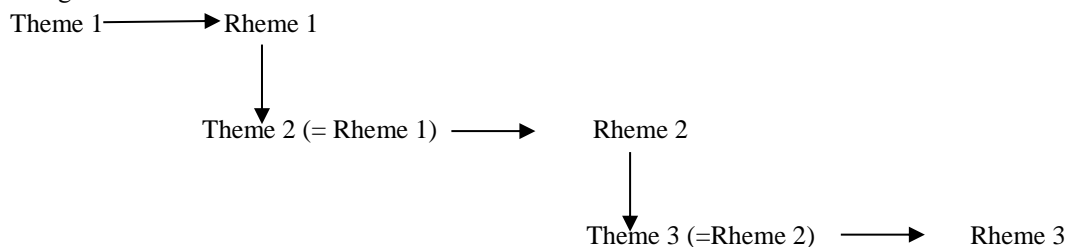


“The victim” remains the theme, while the rhemes provide new information in each sentence. This is a clear and organized way to present facts in a report or court document.

The Constant Thematic Progression reinforces a text’s continuous cohesion and flow by maintaining a clear focus on a single topic across multiple clauses, helping the speaker or writer maintain a clear and unified flow of information.

2.2. The Linear Thematic Progression

Linear Progression occurs when the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the following clause. This pattern of Progression allows information to be developed step by step, creating a clear and logical discourse. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, p.88) described “a linear pattern occurs when the information introduced as rheme in one clause is taken up as the theme in the next”. It allows information to unfold systematically, facilitating the reader's understanding of the text. In addition, this Progression reduces repetition and increases the fluency of the text, making arguments more convincing and logically constructed. The Linear Thematic Progression is shown as follows:



Model 2: The Linear Thematic Progression

Example 2:

The witness heard a loud bang following the shouting.
 The loud bang prompted the witness to call the police.
 The police arrived within five minutes of the call.

Theme 1

The witness

Rheme 1

heard a loud bang following the shouting.

Theme 2 (Rheme 1)

The loud bang

Rheme 2

prompted the witness to call the police.

Theme 3 (Rheme 2)

The police

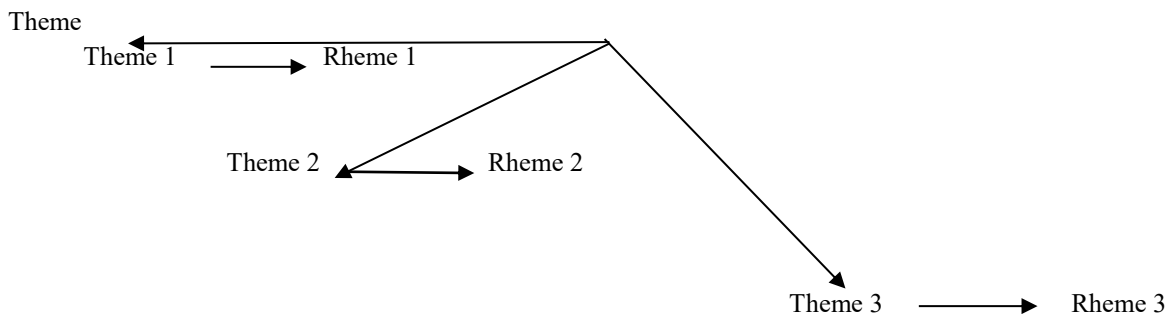
Rheme 3

arrived within five minutes of the call.

In this example, each clause takes the previous clause’s hypothesis and forms the following clause’s predicate, creating a logical and cohesive structure. Linear progression thematic helps present a chronological and logical sequence, effective in building a timeline of events in testimony or reports.

2.3. The Derived Thematic Progression

The Derived Thematic Process differs from other types of Thematic Procession, such as Linear Thematic Procession (in which the theme of one clause becomes the theme of the following clause) and the Constant Thematic Procession (in which the same theme is repeated between clauses). Several themes are connected through a common conceptual framework rather than direct grammatical links in the Derived Thematic Procession. Halliday (1994, p.308) emphasizes the role of the Derived Thematic Procession in discourse: “a text’s coherence depends on its ability to guide the reader through an organized thematic structure”. This process ensures that information is logically organized while maintaining a clear link to the general theme. The Derived Thematic Procession Model:



Model 3: The Derived Thematic Progression

Example 3:

The robbery case revealed several critical issues.

The getaway vehicle was stolen from a nearby neighborhood.

The security system of the bank was deactivated minutes before the incident.

The suspect had prior convictions related to armed robbery.

Each sentence in the example 3 has a different theme: the vehicle, the security system, and the suspect, but all are derived from the central theme: the robbery case. This allows for the structured and comprehensive development of ideas.

2.4. Thematic Progression and Legal Discourse

In SFL, the Theme of a clause is what the clause is about—usually the starting point of the message—while the rheme contains new or important information. A well-developed legal text shows clear thematic progression, where the Themes and Rhymes connect logically across the discourse, helping the reader follow the development of the argument.

Three common patterns of thematic progression include:

1. **Constant Theme pattern:** the same Theme is repeated to build focus.
2. **Linear Theme pattern:** the Rheme of one sentence becomes the Theme of the next.
3. **Split Theme pattern:** A theme is divided into multiple themes later developed as Themes.

3. APPLYING SYSTEMIC FUNCTIONAL LINGUISTIC TO INSTRUCT STUDENTS IN CRIMINAL LAW EXERCISES

When instructing cadets in criminal law exercises, especially at institutions like the PPC II, TP offers a practical and pedagogically sound approach to enhancing writing skills in legal contexts. In criminal law education, cadets are frequently required to compose various legal texts, including case summaries, police reports, legal analyses, and crime scene narratives, all of which demand clear, logical, and coherent argumentation. Thematic progression is a strategic framework that guides how information unfolds across sentences and paragraphs, ensuring clarity and flow in legal reasoning. Among the common TP patterns, linear, constant, and derived progression are particularly useful for structuring legal discourse.

In legal reasoning, these patterns help maintain coherence, trace causality, and distinguish between facts, inferences, and conclusions. By applying thematic progression to criminal law exercises, students learn to Organize facts logically, present cause-effect relationships, emphasize legal reasoning over emotion or personal opinion and reach well-argued conclusions supported by legal grounds. One major challenge in legal education, particularly in criminal law, is guiding students to construct coherent, logical, and persuasive arguments. To address this, Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides tools beyond grammar and meaning-making, primarily through the study of thematic progression. Thematic progression—how information is distributed and developed across clauses and paragraphs—is central to effectively organizing legal arguments. This essay explores how thematic progression can be applied to instruct students in analyzing and writing about criminal law cases, using the real-life inspired legal scenario involving Nguyen Van Manh as a sample exercise.

Sample Exercise, The Case of Nguyen Van Manh: “Nguyen Van Manh was born in 1987, works in the export trade, and often travels far from home. On the afternoon of July 20, 2019, after an extended business trip, Manh had just returned home when he heard the neighborhood gossiping that Ms. Hanh (Manh's wife) had an illicit relationship with a male teacher in the commune. That night, Manh questioned his wife about this information. Ms. Hanh argued back, so Manh got angry and slapped Ms. Hanh on the cheek. Ms. Hanh cried and opened the door to leave the house. Manh was tired from the long journey, so he went to bed. When

he woke up in the morning, and he did not see Ms. Hanh, he saw a suicide note written by Ms. Hanh on the table. Manh quickly ran to her parents' house to look for his wife, but she was not there. After that, the whole family rushed to seek and discovered Ms. Hanh dead in the river. The autopsy results concluded that Ms. Hanh died of drowning, and there were no other signs of injury on her body. The above details are determined to be correct. According to you, did Nguyen Van Manh commit a crime? Why?"

Applying Thematic progression in SFL to analysis and answer the question:

Task: Analyze whether Nguyen Van Manh committed a crime. Use a well-organized paragraph structure that applies thematic progression for clarity.

Using Thematic Progression to instruct students to find out the answer:

- **The Constant Thematic Progression:** The introduction about the person and context. "*Nguyen Van Manh was born in 1987, works in the export trade, and often travels far from home. On the afternoon of July 20, 2019, after an extended business trip.*" This is the constant thematic progression with the focus on the subject (Nguyen Van Manh) as the content introduces who he is and where the incident begins. The Constant TP is used to introduce and maintain focus on Nguyen Van Manh. Developing the events. "*Manh had just returned home when he heard the neighborhood gossiping that Ms. Hanh (Manh's wife) had an illicit relationship with a male teacher in the commune.*" Repeating the Theme keeps the focus on the accused and allows students to discuss his actions clearly and sequentially.

- **The Linear Thematic Progression:** "*That night, Manh questioned his wife about this information. Ms. Hanh argued back, so Manh got angry and slapped Ms. Hanh on the cheek.*" This Linear Thematic Progression moves the narrative forward by turning the theme of one sentence into the theme of the next, establishing a clear cause-effect progression. The Linear TP is used to show how the events unfolded in sequence. Ms. Hanh cried and left the house. Manh noticed her absence the following morning. The discovery of the suicide note alarmed him. This evidence, combined with the autopsy results, suggests a lack of foul play. This structure lets students follow the consequences of each action, helping them connect emotional causes and legal effects. Consequences of the act. "*Ms. Hanh cried and opened the door to leave the house. Manh was tired from the long journey, so he went to bed. When he woke up in the morning, and he did not see Ms. Hanh, he saw a suicide note written by Ms. Hanh on the table. Manh quickly ran to her parents' house to look for his wife, but she was not there. After that, the whole family rushed to seek and discovered Ms. Hanh dead in the river.*" The Linear TP continues to be used. This Linear chain keeps developing events step by step, maintaining temporal and logical flow. The initial Theme is unpacked into separate parts that students analyze individually, teaching them to build complex legal arguments.

- **The Split Thematic Progression:** "*The autopsy results concluded that Ms. Hanh died of drowning, and there were no other signs of injury on her body. The above details are determined to be correct.*" The confirmed facts include the slap, the suicide note, and the autopsy result. The slap could be classified as domestic violence. The note and the autopsy suggest suicide with no signs of further harm. This detail uses Derived TP by taking different aspects, the slap, the autopsy, the note, and relating them all back to the main legal question. This thematic progression is used to analyze multiple legal elements derived from the core question of criminal liability: "Did Nguyen Van Manh commit a crime? Why?" The case involves determining whether Nguyen Van Manh's actions constitute a criminal offense, specifically about his wife's subsequent suicide.

By applying thematic progression, students can argue:

Theme: *Nguyen Van Manh's act of slapping his wife was unlawful but not directly linked to the act of suicide.*

Rheme: *There is insufficient evidence to prove criminal causation for Ms. Hanh's death.*

From the analysis of the exercise by using Thematic Progression, the answer is Nguyen Van Manh did not commit a crime because Manh's actions did not have enough signs of a crime:

- Manh only had the action: he slapped Ms. Hanh once on the cheek due to an argument. The act of slapping Ms. Hanh on the cheek did not cause Ms. Hanh's death.

- Ms. Hanh died in the river after leaving the house and leaving a suicide note, and Manh slept in the house from the time he slapped Ms. Hanh until morning, meaning that Manh did not approach and perform any action on Hanh anymore. Ms. Hanh's cause of death was drowning, so there was no direct connection between Manh's actions and the fatal consequence (Ms. Hanh's death).

Students may conclude:

“Nguyen Van Manh’s action may constitute a minor assault under criminal law, but because there is no causal link or evidence of coercion leading directly to his wife’s suicide, he is likely not criminally liable for her death.” Therefore, Manh’s actions are not significantly dangerous to society.

4. SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN TEACHING CRIMINAL LAW

In the context of innovation in legal theory and practice teaching methods, integrating modern linguistic theories into teaching activities is becoming increasingly necessary. One prominent theory that can have practical effects on developing students' academic writing and legal argumentation skills is Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), proposed by M.A.K. Halliday. In SFL, the concept of Thematic Progression (TP) plays a particularly important role in building coherent and logical texts—essential requirements in the field of criminal law. Thematic Progression (TP) is the way to organize and develop the topics (themes) and theories (rhemes) of sentences in a text, thereby expressing the flow of information clearly and orientated. TP helps writers identify which key information to emphasize (theme) and which new information to introduce (rheme). By flexibly applying TP, learners can organize paragraphs in criminal law writing logically, ensuring the argument is convincing, not disjointed or unnecessarily repetitive. In teaching criminal law, a theoretical subject that requires the ability to apply it in practice, such as analyzing cases, writing case reports, and arguing about the composition of crimes, thematic progression can be exploited in three common forms: linear TP, Constant TP, and Derived TP. Each form can be associated with a different exercise or writing skill.

Specifically, in reports of events or crime scene records, the linear TP form helps learners present events in chronological order, with new information at the end of the previous sentence becoming the topic at the beginning of the following sentence. For example: “The victim left home at 9:00 p.m. At 9:30 p.m., the victim was found unconscious in the park. The park is a place where fights often occur at night.” This linear format helps learners develop a chain of ideas in a cause-and-effect manner, continuously and quickly followed.

In contrast, in analyzing the elements of a crime, the constant TP format is useful when learners maintain a central theme to develop different aspects. For example: “The defendant Nguyen Van A admitted to the act of beating someone. The defendant Nguyen Van A stated that he had a previous conflict with the victim. The defendant Nguyen Van A has no criminal history.” The repetition of the theme does not cause boredom but helps reinforce the information and keep the reader on track with the argument. Meanwhile, the derived TP format is suitable for synthesis analysis essays, where students start from an overarching topic (e.g., “criminal conduct”) and then develop derivative topics such as “weapon used,” “consequences,” “defendant’s purpose,” etc. From there, the essay can develop in-depth, expanding many legal aspects while still maintaining consistency. To effectively incorporate the topic progression into teaching, lecturers can design specific activities such as analyzing sample paragraphs to identify TP, rewriting incoherent paragraphs according to the TP model, and guiding students to use TP in writing the “analysis” and “conclusion” sections of criminal law case studies. The essay assessment should also include criteria for coherence and information organization – reflecting the correct application of TP.

In short, the thematic process in systemic functional linguistics is not only a linguistic theory but also a practical tool to improve writing skills and legal reasoning for criminal law students. The application of TP in teaching not only contributes to innovation in pedagogical methods but also helps students in the police and justice sector develop core professional skills, which will serve them well in future practical work.

5. CONCLUSION

Teaching Criminal Law requires a firm grasp of legal norms and the ability to present legal arguments clearly, logically, and convincingly. In this context, the application of thematic progression in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) provides an effective linguistic approach, helping learners develop legal thinking through the systematic organization and deployment of information in the text. Through three basic types of thematic progression—linear, iterative, and derivative—learners can improve their skills in writing reports, analyzing situations, and arguing about the elements of a crime. This approach also contributes to the formation of specialized academic writing skills, meeting the requirements of vocational training in the field of justice and police.

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