

Comparing Coherence In English Translations And Original Texts At English And Chinese Museums

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Abstract

In today's globalized world, museums play a vital role in promoting cross-cultural communication. Ensuring the coherence of translated texts is essential for effective audience engagement and understanding. While previous studies have examined coherence in academic or political discourse, little attention has been paid to how thematic progression (TP) patterns affect coherence in museum text translation. This study addresses this gap by analyzing differences in TP patterns between original English museum texts and Chinese–English translated texts. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, a mixed-methods approach was adopted. A corpus of 40 museum texts (20 original and 20 translated) was annotated and analyzed quantitatively to identify TP distribution, followed by qualitative analysis of rhetorical function of TP patterns.

Findings show that original English texts use more varied and balanced TP patterns, while translated texts often rely on a single pattern and display more missing links in the thematic chain, affecting coherence. Based on these findings, several TP-informed strategies are proposed to improve textual flow and reader comprehension. This study contributes to translation studies and museum communication by offering genre-sensitive insights into discourse coherence.

Keywords: *Thematic progression; coherence in translation; museum texts*

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I. Introduction

Coherence is a key feature of discourse that enables readers to interpret texts as semantically unified and logically connected (Baker, 2018; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). While cohesion refers to surface-level linguistic ties such as reference and conjunction, coherence functions at a deeper level, shaped by the organization of ideas, information flow, and thematic structure (Fries, 1995; Halliday & Hasan, 1976). In discourse analysis, coherence has been explored through both cognitive and functional lenses, ranging from relevance theory and processing models to systemic functional linguistics (e.g. McCabe, 1999; Yang & Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2014). From a functional linguistic perspective, thematic progression patterns, organizing the flow of information and maintain textual unity across clauses and paragraphs, are considered essential to the construction of discourse coherence (Daneš, 1974; Fries, 1995; McCabe, 1999).

Museum texts, as public-facing texts that interpret historical, scientific, or artistic content, play a dual role in informing and engaging visitors from diverse backgrounds (Ravelli, 2006). To fulfill this role effectively, museum texts must present complex knowledge in a concise, accessible, and coherent manner (Martin & Rose, 2003). This requires not only lexical clarity but also clear structural organization. Consistent thematic development, predictable macrostructures, and suitable discourse features for the museum context are vital to maintaining coherence (Macdonald, 2011; Martin & Rose, 2003).

Translation of museum texts play an important role in cross-cultural communication (Neather, 2008). Although many studies have examined coherence in academic writing, political discourse, or digital communication (e.g., Dijk, 2008; Zappavigna, 2015), relatively little attention has been given to coherence in translated museum texts, especially from the perspective of thematic progression. And, existing translation research of museum texts has focused primarily on terminology, cultural references, or multimodal design (House, 2014; Neather, 2008), leaving a gap in the understanding of how TP differences affect translation quality in this context.

To address this gap, the present study examines the thematic progression patterns of original English museum texts and Chinese–English translated museum texts. It aims to identify their structural differences, evaluate their impact on textual coherence, and propose translation strategies that support coherent and reader-friendly museum discourse.

II. Literature Review

Coherence

Definition of coherence

Coherence is a fundamental concept in discourse analysis and text linguistics, referring to the logical, meaningful, and interpretable connection between different parts of a text or discourse. Halliday and Hasan (1976) define coherence as the quality that makes a text semantically meaningful and enables readers or listeners to understand it as a unified whole. De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981) identified coherence as one of the seven standards of textuality, emphasizing that a coherent text exhibits conceptual consistency and allows readers to interpret information smoothly.

As an essential component of effective discourse, coherence serves as a key criterion for evaluating discourse quality in areas such as student writing, scientific texts, and legal discourse (Fang, 2005; Penman, 1987; Yang & wang, 2017). It ensures comprehensibility and facilitates reader interpretation, allowing discourse to be understood as a logically structured entity rather than a random sequence of sentences (Dijk, 2008). Widdowson (2007) explains that coherence is an interactive process where both the writer's structuring and the reader's interpretative skills work together to create meaning. In translation studies, coherence is crucial for maintaining the integrity of a text when transferring meaning from one language to another (Baker, 2018). Given its importance, coherence has increasingly been examined in cross-cultural and multilingual communication. (Menzel et al, 2017).

Analyzing coherence

According to Halliday and Hasan (1976), coherent text must satisfy two conditions: being consistent with the context in which it is created, the other is a text must have cohesion, that is, all parts in a text must be connected by cohesive devices. However, cohesive markers cannot create a coherent text; cohesive markers have to reflect conceptual relations that make sense (Baker, 2018). Therefore, coherence, which shows the consistency with context, is considered a more reliable indicator of a discourse's intrinsic semantic and logical associations.

Current research on discourse coherence often adopts either a cognitive linguistics perspective or a functional linguistics perspective. The former employs relevance theory, categorization theory, and hierarchical cognition theory for discourse analysis (Zhang, 2014; Zhang & Qiu, 2009), emphasizing the study of coherence as a psychological phenomenon, while the latter explores the nature and manifestation of coherence from the perspective of metafunctions of language, proposing that discourse coherence consists of three major aspects: ideational coherence, interpersonal coherence, and textual coherence. Ideational coherence concerns how a text represents experiences and logical relations, and interpersonal coherence manages the relationship between the

text and its audience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Textual coherence, which concerns the internal organization of information to create a unified and understandable text, is the most relevant to the present study, as museum texts primarily aim to present information in a clear, accessible, and structured way for diverse audiences (Manca, 2011).

To measure textual coherence, a widely adopted method is Thematic Progression (TP) analysis. First introduced by Daneš (1974) and further developed by Fries (1995) and McCabe (1999), TP focuses on how themes (the point of departure of a clause) and rhemes (what is said about the Theme) evolve throughout a text. TP patterns are an important aspect of discourse coherence, for it largely influences textual unity, logical sequencing, and reader comprehension (Daneš, 1974). According to Yang & Wang (2017), five most typical and common patterns of thematic progression are summarized as follows:

- (1) Linear type: the rheme of one clause becomes the theme of the next.
- (2) Constant type: The theme of each clause is consistent with the theme of the first sentence, followed by different rhemes.
- (3) Split type: A complex rheme is divided and used as multiple themes in subsequent clauses.
- (4) Summarized type: The theme of the second clause is derived from the combination of the thematic and rhematic content of the first clause.
- (5) Sprung type: The connection between the theme and the adjacent theme-rheme structures is disrupted, with one or more links in the thematic progression chain omitted. The missing links need to be inferred from the context or the situational setting.

These patterns reveal how information is developed and maintained in a text, serving as effective indicators of textual coherence (McCabe, 1999; Zappavigna, 2015). As an analytical framework in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), TP is applied to various types of texts, including academic writing, translation, political discourse, and digital communication (Dijk, 2008; Fries, 1995; McCabe, 1999; Zappavigna, 2015). Researchers calculate the frequency of each TP pattern to understand how often each type occurs within a text. This statistical distribution helps determine the dominant mode of information development and whether the text maintains a coherent line of thought. Based on existing empirical studies, Table 1 summarizes how coherence is assessed using TP analysis.

Table 1 *Thematic Progression Analysis Framework for Coherence Assessment*

Criterion	Analytical Focus	Implications for Coherence
TP Frequency	Presence of dominant or balanced use of TP patterns	Suggests organized and structured information development
TP Patterning	Predictable progression of Themes (e.g., Constant Theme, Linear Theme)	Indicates cohesive unfolding of meaning across clauses
Genre Alignment	Congruence between TP structure and genre-specific expectations (e.g., general-to-specific)	Supports genre-appropriate coherence and discourse flow

**Note.* This framework draws on Fries' (1995) notion of meaning development through Theme-Rheme structure, McCabe's (1999) cross-linguistic analysis of TP patterns in informational texts, and Martin and Rose's (2007) view of genre-specific coherence realized through patterned thematic progression.

Based on these studies, scholars have pointed out that a coherent text typically exhibits a predictable and traceable thematic flow, enabling readers to follow the development of meaning. In contrast, abrupt shifts in theme or inconsistencies in progression patterns may fragment the discourse and diminish its coherence (e.g., Martin & Rose, 2003; McCabe, 1999; Wang & Li, 2021).

Recognizing this, Thematic Progression (TP) analysis emerges as a systematic approach to diagnosing coherence. By examining how Themes and Rhemes evolve throughout a text, TP analysis not only assesses the presence of coherence but also elucidates the underlying mechanisms by which coherence is sustained or compromised.

Strategies improving coherence in translation

In translation studies, coherence refers to the extent to which the target text (TT) maintains the conceptual and structural unity of the source text (ST) while adapting to the linguistic and cultural norms of the target audience (Hatim & Mason, 1997). Empirical research has explored coherence differences between original English texts and translated English texts, revealing distinct preferences for TP patterns (e.g., Jalilifar, 2009; McCabe, 1999; Wang & Li, 2021), and scholars have provided strategies to maintain coherence in translation.

One key strategy involves adjusting Thematic Progression (TP) patterns to better suit the expectations of the target language. McCabe (1999), in a contrastive study of Spanish-English newspaper texts, manually annotated Theme-Rheme structures and quantified the frequency of TP types. She found that translated texts often overused constant themes, which reduced textual dynamism, emphasizing the importance of selecting appropriate TP patterns to sustain coherence in translation. Another important approach is reordering sentence structure to reflect the logical flow favored in the target language. When source texts rely on parataxis or implicit logical relations, translators should restructure sentences to ensure explicit logical connections and coherent information flow in the target text (Wang and Li, 2021). Further, adding cohesive devices is also a widely used method, especially in Chinese-to-English translation. Since English tends to favor hypotactic structures and explicit logical links, translators often need to insert connectors such as “therefore,” “however,” or “as a result” to clarify logical relationships that are implicit in the source text (Baker, 2018).

Museum texts as a genre: characteristics and translation challenges

Characteristics of museum texts

Ravelli (2006) notes that contemporary museums have long since moved on from the state where objects were left to “speak for themselves”. Museum texts form a distinctive genre of discourse, serving multiple communicative and semiotic functions within cultural and historical institutions. Their primary goal is to inform, educate, and engage visitors, with the informative function being the most fundamental (Kirchberg & Tröndle, 2012; Manca, 2011).

To fulfill the informative function, original English museum texts employ explicit thematic progression and logical sequencing of information (Martin & Rose, 2003), often following a macrostructure that moves from general to specific, guiding the reader through a logical discourse flow (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). A typical museum label might begin with a broad theme (e.g., “Tools of the Trade in Ancient Egypt”) followed by targeted details: “This sickle, dating to 1500 BCE, was used to harvest barley.” Such sequencing supports coherence and accessibility. Additionally, Ravelli (2006) explains that museum writers adjust lexical density, sentence structure, and nominalization to make complex ideas more digestible. For example, compare “Taxonomic classification identifies this animal as *Canis lupus familiaris*” with the simplified: “This is a domestic dog.” The former suits a scientific audience, while the latter better serves family or school groups.

In sum, museum texts tend to be more highly structured and information-dense comparing to general English texts, combining narrative, explanatory, and descriptive functions in a limited space (Ravelli, 2006).

Translation challenges of museum texts

Translating museum text is a complex and interdisciplinary task, involving challenges at the linguistic, cultural, rhetorical, and multimodal levels (Neather, 2008; Ravelli, 2006). Unlike general expository texts, museum texts must balance factual accuracy with accessibility, ensuring that both native and non-native audiences can understand and engage with exhibits (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Macdonald, 2011). Within the linguistic domain, cross-cultural translation raises two primary concerns: terminology translation and cohesion/coherence across languages. Although terminology affects local clarity, its equivalence primarily impacts micro-level semantic accuracy, whereas this research focuses on macro-level textual coherence, especially the organization of information and thematic progression. Therefore, terminology is not considered a core component of coherence in this study.

Existing studies have identified several factors that influence cohesion and coherence in translation, among which, a crucial linguistic factor concerns the different strategies employed by English and Chinese to connect clauses. Wang and Li (2021) point out that English discourse typically follows a hypotactic structure, where logical relationships between clauses are made explicit through connectors (e.g., because, although and therefore). In contrast, Chinese discourse relies on parataxis and implicit cohesion, where clauses are placed side by side without overt linking words, and logical relationships must be inferred by the reader. For example, the Chinese sentence “战争结束，百姓重建家园” (lit. “War ended, people rebuilt their homes”) lacks a conjunction. In English, the same idea requires a connector for clarity: “After the war ended, people began to rebuild their homes.” Without such adjustments, translated English museum texts may appear fragmented or illogical.

Neather (2008) conducted an in-depth study of Chinese-to-English museum text translation, using the Hong Kong Museum of History as a case study. Employing qualitative discourse analysis, based on Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics and museum communication theory, she categorized different translation strategies (e.g., literal translation, paraphrase, contextual adaptation) and evaluated their effects on coherence, readability, and cultural accessibility. She observed that literal or compressed translations often led to a loss of information flow, especially when paratactic Chinese sentences were translated without restructuring.

Apart from general translation strategies, several specific strategies have been proposed to overcome cross-cultural translation challenges. For instance, Qiu & Qiu (2019) found that domestication strategies (e.g., adapting historical references to familiar Western concepts) improved audience comprehension but sometimes reduced cultural authenticity. Xia (2023) recommends paraphrasing complex Chinese idioms and historical terms rather than relying on direct translation to enhance clarity. However, these strategies primarily address specific linguistic or cultural elements and do not necessarily resolve issues of overall textual coherence.

Research gap and research questions

Although many studies have examined coherence in specific texts, most have focused on academic writing, political discourse, or digital communication (e.g., Dijk, 2008; Fries, 1995; Zappavigna, 2015). Research has also explored how coherence is maintained or altered in translation across languages (e.g., Jalilifar, 2009; McCabe, 1999; Wang & Li, 2021). The informative and communicative function of the museum has attracted scholars' attention as well, and museum text is considered to form a central component of a museum's communication agenda (Ravelli, 2006). However, existing studies addressing cross-cultural translation challenges tend to focus on terminology and cultural adaptation, rather than examining museum texts holistically through the lens of thematic progression.

To address this gap, this study aims to analyze coherence differences between original English museum texts and Chinese-English translated museum texts, specifically focusing on TP patterns and their impact on textual coherence and visitor comprehension. The research is guided by the following questions:

- (1) What are the differences in TP patterns between the English text in Chinese and English museum?
- (2) How do the differences impact coherence in translation?
- (3) What strategies can be used to maintain coherence in Chinese-to-English museum text translation?

III. Method

Rationale

This study adopts a mixed-method approach that mixes qualitative and quantitative research techniques (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004), combining a quantitative corpus-based analysis with a qualitative textual analysis. To answer the first question, a quantitative corpus-based analysis was employed to identify and compare the frequency and distribution of TP patterns in the English text from Chinese and English museums. To gain deeper insight into how differences in TP influence textual coherence, a qualitative textual analysis was also carried out on representative samples. This allows for detailed examination of how thematic shifts, pattern variation, and information flow affect reader comprehension and discourse continuity (Jalilifar, 2009). To address the third research question, this study drew on the insights gained from both the quantitative and qualitative findings. By identifying recurrent patterns of incoherence, such as overuse of single TP types or abrupt thematic breaks, the analysis informs a set of practical, data-driven translation strategies. This interpretive step aligns with previous research that links textual analysis with translation guidance (McCabe, 1999; Neather, 2008).

By combining quantitative pattern analysis with qualitative interpretation, this mixed-method ensures a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of coherence in translation. It also aligns with previous studies that examine discourse features in translated texts using both statistical evidence and close textual reading (McCabe, 1999; Neather, 2008; Wang & Li, 2021). Therefore, the chosen research design strengthens the validity and reliability of the findings.

Text selection

To ensure comparability and contextual relevance, all texts were drawn from museum exhibit panels, which represent a consistent genre of public informational discourse.

To further enhance the reliability and comparability of the texts, this study selects materials from two authoritative national museums: the British Museum and the Hubei Provincial Museum. While the British Museum is globally recognized for its diverse international audience, receiving 5.82 million visitors in 2023 (The British Museum Annual Review, 2023), the Hubei Provincial Museum also holds significant status within China's museum system. As one of the most visited regional museums, it received over 4.36 million visitors in 2023, among whom a growing proportion are international tourists (Hubei Provincial Department of Culture and Tourism, 2024), underlying the growing importance of high-quality translated texts for the Hubei Provincial Museum. Given the two museum's comparable visitor volumes, international recognition, and professional standards of exhibition curation and translation, they provide a well-matched basis for analyzing coherence in museum texts across cultural and linguistic contexts.

Since this study focuses on coherence in English museum texts, with particular attention to their thematic progression, only texts that are self-contained, discursive in nature, and structurally suitable for independent TP analysis were selected (Fries, 1995; McCabe, 1999; Wang & Li, 2021). In contrast to descriptive labels attached to individual artefacts (e.g., "on the upper part of the sculpture" "behind the bronze vessel"), which are often spatially anchored and dependent on visual context, the selected texts were drawn exclusively from introductory or contextualizing segments (e.g., an introduction of historical background, an overview of a gallery section, or interpret broader cultural themes). These segments provide linguistic structure conducive to coherence analysis, rather than relying on multimodal or spatial referencing.

Additionally, as analyzing thematic progression is most effective when applied to stretches of discourse containing at least three to five sentences, as shorter segments often fail to reveal the logical development of themes (Gee, 2014), the selected paragraphs consist of at least 3 full sentences, and each sentence is composed of one or more clauses which is widely regarded as the analysis unit for thematic progression (e.g., Daneš, 1974; Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013; Thompson, 2004).

Based on the established selection criteria, a total of 56 English texts from the two museums initially met the requirements. For the purpose of facilitating quantitative analysis by ensuring comparability between the number of two corpora, a subset of 40 texts (20 from each museum) was ultimately selected. These 40 samples were chosen according to the number of clauses, ranked from most to fewest, so as to maximize analytical depth and maintain a balanced textual length across both groups. The final two corpora are shown as follows:

Corpus A: Original English Museum Texts (n=20)

These texts were sourced from on-site exhibition materials in the British Museum. Each text ranges from approximately 50 to 150 words, aligning with the standard length of museum wall texts (Macdonald, 2011).

Corpus B: Translated English Museum Texts (n=20)

This corpus consists of English translations of Chinese museum texts, obtained from the Hubei Provincial Museum. All texts were officially translated from Chinese into English and display in physical exhibitions.

There are exactly 77 clauses in each of the 20 segments of the two corpora after the manual clause segmentation, yielding 76 clause pairs for observing thematic progression.

Data coding

The data coding began by extracting the selected museum texts (translated and original) from exhibition images and converting them into editable textual format. Each passage was segmented manually into clauses, which served as the minimum analytical units for thematic progression (TP) analysis.

In Microsoft Word, each clause was annotated manually for its Theme (i.e., the point of departure of the message) and Rheme (i.e., what is presented about the Theme), and the TP pattern it exhibited was identified and recorded using a table, where each row represented a clause and included the following fields: clause number, Theme, Rheme, and TP pattern type.

To answer the first question, finding out the differences between the TP patterns of the two museums' texts, the TP types were categorized according to the five-pattern typology adopted in this study: Linear, Constant, Split, Summarized, and Sprung (Yang & Wang, 2017). Following annotation, the categorized TP data were imported into SPSS to conduct descriptive statistics on the frequency and distribution of each TP type in the original and translated corpora. To assess the differences in terms of paragraph-level diversity, a numerical value was assigned to each paragraph based on the number of distinct TP types it employed. For instance, a paragraph using only one TP type was coded as "1"; one paragraph using two types was coded as "2," and so on. These values were entered into SPSS as scale data to calculate the mean, range, and standard deviation. This allowed for a comparison of structural complexity and discourse variation across corpora. A higher mean and standard deviation indicate greater thematic variation; lower values suggest a more formulaic structure.

To answer the second research question of how these differences affect text coherence, following the quantitative analysis, a qualitative phase was conducted. Five representative texts were selected from each corpus for in-depth analysis. Selection criteria included (1) clause length (5–7 clauses) and (2) presence of 2–3 of the most frequent TP patterns (identified in the quantitative phase). For original English texts, this typically included Linear, Constant, and Split patterns; for translated texts, Linear, Constant, and Sprung were dominant. Each text

was analyzed clause by clause to examine the functional role of Theme-Rheme structures in organizing information. Instances of abrupt Theme shifts, disrupted information development, or unclear reader orientation were identified as signs of reduced coherence.

Finally, to address the third research question concerning strategies for maintaining coherence in Chinese-to-English museum text translation, the study draws on the key findings from both the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Based on recurring coherence-related issues observed in the translated texts, it proposes a set of translation strategies aimed at improving thematic continuity and logical clarity.

Data analysis

The quantitative data for answering RQ1, is extracted from photos of the texts from both museums. The selected texts were first segmented into independent clauses in Microsoft Word, following Halliday's principles of clause as the unit of meaning (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013). Each clause was annotated for its Theme, Rheme, and corresponding TP pattern, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 *Theme-Rheme structure of museum texts*

Clause number	Theme	Rheme	TP pattern
Sequence number of the clause	the initial element that sets the point of departure for the message	the part that carries new or developing information	Linear/Constant/Split/ Summarized/ Sprung

**Note.* The filling of TP mode starts from the second clause and records the thematic progression mode from the previous sentence to the next sentence.

The data on the TP pattern of original texts and translated texts are imported into SPSS 2024 as nominal measure, respectively. For the convenience of recording, all five TP patterns are entered in numerical form (1=constant type; 2=linear type; 3=split type; 4=summarized type; 5=sprung type). SPSS is used to analyze and generate descriptive data to demonstrate the proportion of each thematic progression pattern in the original and translated paragraphs.

To examine the differences of TP patterns at the paragraph level (i.e., the different levels of TP pattern diversity in original and translated texts), a second round of SPSS analysis was conducted using scale data. For this step, each paragraph was assigned a numerical value indicating the number of distinct TP types it contained (e.g., a paragraph using only Linear TP was coded as 1, while a paragraph combining Linear and Constant TP was coded as 2. These values were treated as scale-level variables in SPSS, allowing the program to calculate minimum, maximum, mean, and standard deviation for each corpus. These statistical measures enabled a direct comparison of the extent to which multiple TP patterns were employed within individual paragraphs. A higher mean and standard deviation would indicate greater variability and structural richness, while lower values suggest more formulaic paragraph construction.

The answering of RQ2 is based on the qualitative phase of the study. A detailed discourse analysis was conducted on five representative paragraphs from each corpus (the English original texts corpus and English translated texts corpus). The analysis employed a clause-by-clause thematic structure annotation, drawing upon established models in Systemic Functional Linguistics (Fries, 1995; McCabe, 1999). Each clause was segmented into Theme and Rheme, and the theme to theme or theme to rheme linkage across adjacent clauses was examined to assess the development and continuity of meaning. In line with prior studies (e.g., Liu & Ding, 2022; Zamel, 1983), coherence was judged based on the consistency of thematic progression, the absence of abrupt shifts, and the presence of logically traceable informational flow.

Special attention was given to how thematic chains were maintained, altered, or disrupted in translation. For each paragraph, the analysis focused on: (1) Whether thematic elements were preserved or restructured across clauses; and (2) Whether translated clauses exhibited Sprung TP patterns (i.e., disruptions of thematic links), potentially reducing discourse coherence.

The RQ3, concerning the translation strategies of museums texts, is answered based on both quantitative and qualitative data. The quantitative results reveal a clear preference for certain TP patterns in original English texts, suggesting how Chinese source clauses can be restructured to align with these preferred progression types can enhance thematic clarity and improve conformity with English discourse norms. Meanwhile, the qualitative analysis provides specific instances where logical connections are weakened or disrupted due to literal translation or cultural assumptions. These instances give insight into how the idiomaticity of Chinese could hinder logic across sentences or how to connect clauses in Chinese museum's translation texts without common knowledge of cultural background.

IV. Findings

Overview of Thematic Progression Pattern Distribution Differences

For the descriptive data of the proportion of each thematic progression pattern in the original and translated paragraphs, the result is shown in table 3.

Table 3 *The distribution of Thematic Progression types in each corpus*

TP Pattern	Original English texts	Translated English texts
Constant	31.6%	27.6%
Linear	31.6%	44.7%
Split	30.3%	7.9%
Summarized	5.3%	5.3%
Sprung	1.3%	14.5%
Total	100%	100%

As the table shows, Linear TP is a shared preference across both corpora, accounting for 31.6% in original English texts and 44.7% in translated English texts, indicating that a stepwise development of ideas is particularly suited to the expository nature of museum texts. Same result has been found by McCabe (1999) as well, as he proposes: "...it would seem that the simple linear thematic pattern would want to predominate in the history textbook corpus, given the asymmetrical writer/reader relationship" (p.191).

Beyond this shared feature, the two corpora demonstrate notable differences. In the original English texts, Constant (31.6%) and Split (30.3%) types are also prominently used, resulting in a relatively balanced distribution among the three major progression types. In contrast, the translated English texts show a heavy reliance on Linear and Constant, with Split TP is significantly underused (7.9%).

Notably, the Sprung progression appears in 14.5% of the translated English clauses, making it the third most frequently used pattern. Sprung progression, marked by a lack of thematic linkage between adjacent clauses, often leads to abrupt shifts in topic or logic. Its relatively high frequency in the translations may point to a breakdown in discourse coherence.

Difference in diversity degree of Thematic Progression Pattern

As for the diversity of thematic progression patterns at the paragraph level, statistics are shown in table 4.

Table 4 Paragraph-Level Thematic Progression Diversity

	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Original text	20	2	4	2.50	.607
Translated text	20	1	4	2.15	.745

As shown above, the original English texts exhibit a higher mean number of TP types per paragraph and a greater standard deviation, indicating more flexibility and variation in thematic development. In contrast, the translated texts tended to adopt a more singular structure, with a lower average diversity score and less variation. Many translated paragraphs relied exclusively on a single TP type.

Effect of Different Thematic Progression Patterns and Translation Strategies

Coherence-Promoting Patterns in Thematic Progression

In the qualitative analysis of original English museum texts, a recurring organizational pattern was observed among paragraphs that contained a combination of Linear, Constant, and Split TP patterns. These texts typically began with a clause or two employing Linear or Constant progression to establish the main topic or provide a general overview of the theme. This initial use of a stable thematic structure served to ground the reader, ensuring a clear orientation within the discourse.

Once the theme had been introduced and stabilized, many paragraphs transitioned into Split progression, whereby the initial rheme was unpacked into multiple thematic elements. This allowed the text to elaborate on the subcomponents of the topic in a logically segmented and reader-friendly manner.

Take one segment from the British Museum for example.

British, European and Byzantine objects (T1) tell the story of a period of great change when territorial wars and political turmoil shaped the continent (R1) we know today. From the power and dominance of the Church in everyday life, to the social change spread through Europe by a new merchant class, unique and famous objects (T2) provide a gateway to the major developments of the age (R2). The ritual and protocol of the royal court (T3) is explored (R3), as well as the cultural, intellectual and political exchange (T4) brought about by travel, trade and pilgrimage (R4). Examples of sacred art (T5) also show how the divine was represented at the time (R5).

The paragraph begins with a Constant progression pattern, where the main theme “objects” is maintained across the first two clauses: “British, European and Byzantine objects tell the story...” and “unique and famous objects provide a gateway...”. This repetition of the thematic element serves to anchor the discourse and foreground the central communicative focus of the text: the role of museum objects in narrating historical change.

After establishing this stable thematic base, the paragraph transitions into a Split progression in the following three clauses. These clauses successively develop specific aspects of the “major developments of the age,” which had been introduced in the rheme of the second sentence. The themes: “The ritual and protocol of the royal court”, “the cultural, intellectual and political exchange”, and “examples of sacred art”, can all be seen as semantic subdivisions of the broader concept of social transformation. They serve to unpack the general rheme (“developments of the age”) into a series of thematically related subtopics, each contributing to a more detailed understanding of the paragraph’s overarching theme.

This Constant/Linear–Split structure enhances coherence by first providing the reader with a clear and consistent thematic thread, then elaborating on it through a diversified yet logically connected set of examples.

Coherence-Weakening Patterns and Improvement Strategy

On the other hand, a recurring feature observed in the translated English texts is the frequent use of Sprung TP pattern, in which the theme of a clause fails to establish a clear link with the preceding rheme, leading to logical discontinuity and potential comprehension difficulties. This issue is particularly evident in translations of historical or culturally embedded narratives, where implicit background knowledge is often required to infer thematic connections.

Take a segment from the Hubei Provincial Museum for example.

The ensuing drain on silver was so severe and opium addiction so widespread (T1) that both the state and its people were on the brink of extinction (R1). During his office as Governor-general of Huguang, Lin Zexu (T2) imposed a rigorous ban on opium (R2), a precedent that he was to draw on for banning and destroying opium in Guangdong.

The sudden shift in theme from the prevailing of opium to a historical figure represents a classic case of Sprung progression. The first clause presents the consequences of the opium trade, but the second introduces Lin Zexu without any explicit thematic bridge or referential cue to indicate his relevance to the previous clause. While a Chinese reader or someone familiar with Qing dynasty history may immediately associate Lin Zexu with the anti-opium movement, foreign readers unfamiliar with the cultural context are left to infer the connection independently.

If we switch the word order of the translation appropriately, it can transfer to a more coherent version as it is showed below.

The ensuing drain on silver was so severe and opium addiction so widespread (T1) that both the state and its people were on the brink of extinction. A rigorous ban on opium (T2) was imposed by Lin Zexu, during his office as Governor-general of Huguang...

To maintain coherence, translators should consider explicitly reconstructing the theme–rheme linkage, thereby ensuring that logical relationships between clauses are accessible even to readers without prior cultural or historical knowledge.

Another notable feature of the translated English texts is that they showed a stronger tendency toward single-pattern usage, with many paragraphs relying exclusively on Linear or Constant progression, while the original English museum texts prefer to employ a mixture of TP types within individual paragraphs, often combining Linear, Constant, and Split progressions to achieve rhetorical variation and thematic flexibility. This structural simplicity in translated texts may result in reduced textual dynamism, potentially affecting how effectively information is organized and understood, as the examples showed below.

In the process of modernization, Zhang Zhidong (T1) came to realize the acute shortage of talent (R1). He (T2) succeeded in providing Hubei with a relatively comprehensive modern education system (R2) by reforming antiquated academies on the one hand and establishing modern ones at all levels on the other. Also, he (T3) had students sent overseas for studies (R3) in order to train up a great number of talents who were well versed in modern skills to meet the needs of not only Hubei but also the nation as a whole.

In this paragraph, clauses are connected solely by Constant progression, with the same theme “Zhang Zhidong”. The original Chinese version for this translated text is

随着洋务新政的推行，张之洞深感人才的不足，一方面对旧式书院进行改革，另一方面设立各级各类新式学堂，在湖北建立起较为完备的近代教育体系。同时延揽名师，大量派遣游学学生，为湖北乃至全国造就了大批新式人才。

In Chinese, it is common to find several verb phrases in a single sentence, connected without conjunctions or with zero subject, relying on shared context for interpretation (Li & Thompson, 1981). Therefore,

when such long Chinese clauses are translated directly into English, they are often segmented into multiple shorter sentences, each repeating the same grammatical subject or thematic element. However, this can sometimes lead to excessive use of Constant Thematic Progression in the translated text and as McCabe (1999) observes, constant repetition of the same theme without rhetorical variation or logical markers can make the text feel monotonous and underdeveloped, weakening discourse coherence.

Adjust thematic sequencing, insert logical connectors, and restructure sentence patterns can be appropriate translation strategies. Take the same segment just mentioned for example. A revised version could be

In the process of modernization, Zhang Zhidong came to realize the acute shortage of talent. Reforming antiquated academies on the one hand and establishing modern ones at all levels on the other, he succeeded in providing Hubei with a relatively comprehensive modern education system. Besides recruiting eminent teachers, he had students sent overseas for studies in order to train up a great number of talents who were well versed in modern skills to meet the needs of not only Hubei but also the nation as a whole.

By simply changing the clause order and add the logic link such as “Besides recruiting eminent teachers...”, this paragraph can be much more coherent than before.

V. Discussion

As museum texts play an essential role in communicating cultural knowledge to international audiences, their English translations carry significant weight in shaping cross-cultural understanding. During preliminary observations at the British Museum and the Hubei Provincial Museum, the author found that although translated texts in Chinese museums targeted foreign readers, their translation often lacked clarity or logical flow. Given that museum texts serve both informative and intercultural communicative functions, their translation requires careful consideration of linguistic, cultural, and rhetorical factors. Recognizing that discourse coherence is central to effective meaning-making, this study approaches museum text translation from the perspective of thematic progression to investigate how translated texts can better fulfill their communicative role.

Against this backdrop, the present study identifies key differences in the distribution and diversity of TP patterns between the two text types, analyzes how these differences impact the perceived coherence of translated texts, and further proposes strategies that can help maintain or enhance coherence in Chinese-to-English museum translation.

Differences in Thematic Progression Patterns and Their Effects

To answer the first research question, a comparative statistical analysis was conducted. The results reveal clear distinctions in both the distribution and diversity level of TP types across the two text categories. The original English museum texts employ a more diverse combination of TP patterns, and often alternate between two or more TP types within a single paragraph, creating a flexible and layered structure, which is consistent with the findings in McCabe (1999) that original English texts demonstrated greater structural variety and thematic flexibility. In contrast, Chinese-to-English translated texts tend to rely on a single dominant pattern, most commonly Linear or Constant, with limited variation within one paragraph, echoing issues identified in Jalilifar (2009) that translated English texts often result in rhetorical monotony. Also, the translated texts exhibit a significantly higher proportion of Sprung progression, a pattern characterized by abrupt shifts in thematic focus without clear linkage to the preceding discourse, comparing to original English texts.

A qualitative analysis is following up to reveal how these differences in TP usage affect the coherence of texts at the discourse level. The lack of variation in TP patterns, often reflected in the repetitive use of a single pattern within a paragraph, Chinese-English translated texts sometimes result in limited thematic development and occur to target audiences as monotonous and underdeveloped. Additionally, the frequent occurrence of Sprung

progression in translations leads to abrupt shifts and disrupted logical flow. These issues are particularly problematic for readers unfamiliar with the original cultural context, as they are unable to infer sentence associations based on historical background knowledge, which is also a challenge noted by Neather (2008) in the translation of culturally embedded discourse. Such findings highlight the importance of thematic organization in achieving effective communication in translation, especially in informational genres like museum texts.

Translation Strategies

To answer the RQ3, effectively reducing the occurrence of such problems, several strategies can be used based on the comparative research findings of this study and the contributions of previous scholars in the study of coherence, few strategies can be proposed here. For translators working with Chinese museum texts, ensuring coherence in English translation demands careful discourse-level reorganization. When translating long Chinese sentences composed of multiple clauses, however, with the same theme, it is essential not only to segment the sentence into manageable English units, but also to adjust thematic progression by varying the subjects or themes. This is in line with the suggestion proposed by Martin and Rose (2007) that it is practicable for translators to deliberately alternate between Constant and Linear progression, or strategically insert Split progression to reinforce sub-themes. Repeating the same theme throughout can lead to a monotonous and underdeveloped paragraph structure, ultimately reducing textual quality. Moreover, as many studies have pointed out, what appears as coordination in Chinese, a sequence of clauses joined without overt connectors, may in fact reflect implicit logical relations, such as cause-effect or contrast (e.g., Li & Thompson, 1981; Wang & Li, 2021). Since English favors explicit hypotactic structures, it is necessary for translators to clarify these implicit relations through the use of appropriate logical connectors (e.g., “therefore,” “in contrast,” “as a result”) to preserve coherence.

Additionally, the frequent appearance of Sprung progression in translated museum texts can often be attributed to cultural assumptions embedded in the source text. Background knowledge that is taken for granted in the Chinese context may not be readily accessible to international readers. In such cases, the introduction of inserted explanations or bridging phrases can help restore the coherence chain by making implicit references explicit and guiding the reader through culturally unfamiliar information. These strategies reinforce the broader argument advanced by scholars like Zamel (1983) and Widdowson (2007) that coherence is not solely a product of grammatical accuracy, but of purposeful discourse construction that considers the cognitive and cultural expectations of the audience. This is particularly vital in museum translation, where meaning must travel across linguistic, cultural, and educational boundaries.

Cause of the Thematic Progression Pattern

The findings of this study generally align with the initial hypothesis that differences in thematic progression (TP) patterns between original English museum texts and their Chinese–English translations would impact textual coherence. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Jalilifar, 2009; McCabe, 1999), the original English texts demonstrated a balanced use of Linear, Constant, and Split progression patterns, contributing to varied thematic development and stronger cohesion. In contrast, translated texts tended to over-rely on single TP types and present higher occurrences of Sprung progression, which supports the expectation that translations may struggle to reproduce the discourse-level coherence of source-language originals.

This pattern is largely attributable to structural and typological differences between English and Chinese. As noted by Li and Thompson (1981), English is a subject-prominent, overt-cohesion language, while Chinese is topic-prominent, relying heavily on covert coherence and contextual inference. These differences lead to divergent discourse construction strategies: where English favors syntactic completeness and explicit logical

sequencing, Chinese tolerates ellipsis, implicit connections, and fluid clause chaining. These contrasting norms make theme-rheme alignment and TP pattern replication particularly challenging in translation, as echoed in prior contrastive discourse studies (Wang & Li, 2021). However, it is unexpected to find the dominance of Linear progression in the translated museum texts. While Linear TP is often considered effective in maintaining continuity (Fries, 1995), its repetitive and unvaried use across multiple clauses, results in rhetorical monotony and blurred informational hierarchy (McCabe, 1999). This suggests that even coherent TP types, when overused without functional adaptation (e.g., shifting to Constant to mark thematic stability), may impair the overall quality of discourse. In contrast to expectations that Sprung patterns would be the primary disruptor, it is this rigid reliance on Linear TP that proves equally problematic. One possible explanation is that translators tend to prioritize grammatical simplicity and syntactic equivalence over rhetorical diversity, particularly when handling culturally dense and historically complex content.

Implications

The results of this study offer insights on multiple levels. Theoretically, the study supports existing views in Systemic Functional Linguistics that coherence arises not merely from clause-level cohesion, but from the dynamic orchestration of theme-rheme relations across discourse (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2013; Martin & Rose, 2003). It also extends previous translation research by demonstrating that textual coherence is not solely disrupted by errors or omissions, but by imbalanced TP patterns that do not align with genre expectations or reader processing norms. Methodologically, the study offers a replicable framework that integrates quantitative TP distribution analysis with qualitative thematic progression tracking at the clause level. This dual approach enhances the granularity of discourse-based translation evaluation and provides a viable model for future genre-specific translation assessment, especially for public-facing informational texts.

Seeing from a practical view, the results have implications for museum translators, curators, and cultural communication specialists. Translators should avoid mechanically replicating sentence-level structure and instead focus on discourse-level coherence, ensuring thematic variation and logical flow. Training programs for museum translators might incorporate TP-based analysis to raise awareness of rhetorical structure. Museum curators may also benefit from coherence-checking tools to assess the readability and accessibility of translated texts for international visitors.

Limitations

While this study provides meaningful insights into the coherence of museum text translation through thematic progression analysis, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, due to practical constraints, the sample size for the quantitative analysis was relatively small. Although the patterns identified are indicative, the statistical findings may not be fully representative of broader museum text practices and should be interpreted with caution.

Similarly, the qualitative analysis was based on a limited number of paragraphs. As such, the coherence-related translation strategies proposed in this study are exploratory and should be regarded as tentative suggestions rather than comprehensive guidelines. A more robust set of strategies will require further validation across a larger and more diverse corpus. Another important limitation of the current study lies in its lack of reader-based validation. All judgments regarding coherence and thematic progression were made through textual analysis, without incorporating direct feedback from actual readers. As coherence is ultimately a reader-centered construct, relying solely on linguistic features may overlook how different audiences perceive and interpret translated museum texts. Future research could incorporate reader-response methods, such as interviews or comprehension questionnaires, to evaluate how different TP patterns affect user understanding and reading experience. Such

feedback would not only strengthen the empirical basis of coherence assessment but also help verify the practical effectiveness of proposed translation strategies.

Additionally, this study focuses primarily on narrative-style exhibition texts in history museums. Future research could expand the scope by comparing coherence patterns and TP preferences across different types of museum texts (e.g., art museums, science centers, and natural history museums), and by examining descriptive texts as distinct from narrative or explanatory ones. Exploring how genre conventions interact with thematic structure could provide a fuller understanding of coherence in museum discourse. Also, future studies may benefit from more advanced digital tools and computational methods, which would allow for larger-scale data analysis and greater consistency in TP annotation. This could facilitate the development of more generalizable and context-sensitive translation strategies for specialized museum genres, ultimately enhancing the clarity, coherence, and intercultural accessibility of translated texts.

VI. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how thematic progression (TP) patterns differ between original English museum texts and Chinese–English translated texts, how these differences influence textual coherence, and what translation strategies can be employed to improve coherence in museum discourse. Drawing on Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative analysis of TP distributions with qualitative discourse analysis of selected texts.

The findings reveal that original English museum texts typically employ a varied and balanced combination of TP patterns, contributing to strong thematic continuity and rhetorical clarity. In contrast, translated texts often rely heavily on a single TP type, and demonstrate a higher frequency of Sprung progression, which can undermine coherence and hinder comprehension. These patterns suggest that structural imbalance and lack of rhetorical adjustment are key challenges in Chinese-to-English museum text translation. To address these issues, several strategies can be applied, such as increasing TP pattern variation, restructuring information flow, and using cohesive devices to clarify implicit logic and bridge cultural gaps. These strategies are essential not only for improving translation quality but also for enhancing the communicative effectiveness of museums in cross-cultural contexts.

By focusing on thematic progression, this study offers a deeper understanding of discourse-level coherence in public informational texts. It underscores the importance of aligning translation practices with the textual conventions and processing expectations of the target language audience. Though limited in scale, the study offers a replicable analytical framework and practical insights that can inform both future research and professional translation practice. With museums increasingly serve as vital platforms for cultural communication, it is hoped that this study will encourage continued exploration into how translation can support museums in their role as active agents of cultural exchange.

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