Contrastive Theme Variation
An intermediate summary of my Ph.D. project
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Despite their strong genetic relation, the English and German languages show a variety of contrastive differences, which pose problems during the translation process. One such contrastive difference is Theme. Halliday and Matthiessen (2014: 89) define Theme as the “point of departure of the message”, a system that is not limited to English, but may be applied across languages. This definition of Theme is very broad and abstract, and it can be argued that a multitude of clause elements can fulfill this function. In English, a variety of Theme zones have been proposed by systemic functional linguists (Berry 1996), with Halliday & Matthiessen’s (2014) concept of Theme as everything up to the first experiential element being among the most popular. For German, Steiner & Teich (2004) have argued that Theme in German is limited to the one element before the Finite, which may be instantiated by a variety of different experiential and also non-experiential constituents. This lack of universally accepted formal and functional definitions makes Theme a challenging unit of analysis in an empirical research project, especially in contrastive analyses.

In this paper, I will report on the development and state of my Ph.D. project. The main goals of this project are twofold: First, I want to understand all thematic differences between English and German and second, I want to examine these contrastive differences in the context of translation to study the extent of their influence on the translation product. For this purpose, I will introduce and discuss different approaches to Theme structure in both languages and demonstrate the effects of these on the analysis and interpretation of Theme-induced translation shifts in English-German translations. This paper will include an intermediate summary of corpus analyses of the English-German translation corpus CroCo (Hansen-Schirra et al. 2012), as well as an outline of the upcoming steps of my Ph.D. project.
References


