

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to investigate Swedish advanced learners' written English in terms of the organization of information in argumentative essays. The study deals with Swedish non-native speakers' (NNSs') use of what is referred to as themes within Systemic Functional Linguistics, i.e. the beginning of sentences (Halliday 1985, 1994; Halliday and Matthiessen 2004). It also investigates the use of cleft constructions as a means by which the thematic structure of a sentence can be varied. It is based on material from the Swedish component of the International Corpus of Learner English (SWICLE) and comparable native speaker (NS) writing from the LOCNESS corpus.

Themes can express different types of meanings – textual, interpersonal, and experiential – and may vary in complexity. The study compares the complexity of NNSs' and NSs' themes and the types of meanings expressed in the themes in a selection of 40 NNS and 40 NS essays. It also compares the use of some specific types of interpersonal themes in all argumentative essays in the SWICLE corpus and in an equally large sample of argumentative writing from the LOCNESS corpus, i.e. approximately 175,000 words of NNS and NS writing, respectively. Furthermore, it investigates how cleft constructions are used in the distribution of information in the Swedish NNSs' argumentative essays.

The results show, for instance, that the NNSs' themes tend to be more complex than the NSs' themes and that they more often contain interpersonal information. Moreover, the analysis of the NNSs' and the NSs' use of cleft constructions reveals that the NNSs use these constructions more often than the NSs and that they use them for certain functions, such as to thematize new information and to express personal opinions, more often than the NSs.

The differences lead to stylistic differences between the NNS and the NS writing in terms of the writers' involvement in the text, the writers' interaction with the readers, and the argumentative strategies used. Three main factors, viz. transfer, the use of learner strategies, and lack of knowledge, are identified as contributing to the differences between the NNSs' and the NSs' use of themes. The influence of two types of transfer (linguistic and cultural), two types of learner strategies (the use of formulaic expressions and the use of high frequency items), and lack of knowledge within three different areas (registers, textual organization, and argumentative strategies) are discussed.