

Unpacking Information-Chain Mechanisms in SOLAS Provisions Based on Thematic-Progression Analysis

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Abstract: To reveal how legal information is connected in the English provisions of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) and to provide a basis for maritime legal translation in China, this study examines the English provisions of SOLAS Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2. Drawing on the Theme–Rheme theory of systemic functional linguistics, it analyzes their thematic-progression patterns and information-chain features. The findings indicate that CONSTANT, OTHER, and LINEAR are the principal modes through which SOLAS provisions organize information. Chapter V shows more prominent topic shifts, whereas Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 more often sustain the same regulated object or develop information introduced in preceding units. Based on these findings, the study translates thematic-progression analysis into an information-chain approach to maritime legal translation. The approach focuses on identifying the scope of a provision, the legal actor, the relation between successive units, and the legally decisive information that must remain explicit in translation. The study explains the information organization of SOLAS provisions from a source-text perspective and provides a structured reference for maritime legal texts.

Keywords: SOLAS Convention; Maritime Legal Discourse; Thematic Progression; Maritime Legal Translation

1. Introduction

The International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) is a core international instrument for maritime safety. Its English provisions combine legal and technical-regulatory features, specifying legal actors, conditions of application, and legal consequences in matters such as navigation safety, shipboard equipment, identification, and security. Accurate

interpretation therefore depends not only on terminology and syntax but also on how legal information develops across successive provisions.

Thematic progression offers a discourse-based means of examining this organization. The Theme is the point of departure for clause-level information development, whereas the Rheme carries the information developed from it. Their relations across adjacent clauses show how topics are maintained, shifted, or advanced and affect the clarity of legal actors, regulated objects, and applicable conditions [1,2].

Existing research has addressed legal language, maritime English, discourse analysis, and translation, but systematic analysis of thematic-progression patterns and information-chain features in SOLAS English provisions remains limited. This study examines Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2, which differ in regulatory objects and provision functions, to compare their progression patterns, chapter-level variation, and discourse functions [3-7].

The study further translates this analysis into an information-chain approach to maritime legal translation. Its findings provide a reference for identifying legal actors, scope of application, and relations between successive provisions in SOLAS translation.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Foundations

2.1 Thematic Progression Theory and Its Analytical Approach

Theme and Rheme are central concepts in the systemic functional analysis of clause-level information structure. Halliday discussed Theme in relation to information organization in the English clause, and Halliday and Matthiessen later treated the clause as a unit of message: the Theme serves as the point of departure for information development, while the Rheme carries the information developed from that point.

Unlike traditional syntactic analysis, Theme–Rheme theory focuses on how discourse meaning is constructed through initial elements, topic selection, and information arrangement. In legal provisions, Themes often encode legal actors, regulated objects, scope of application, or conditional frames; the selection of Themes directly affects readers' understanding of a provision's structure and regulatory focus [1].

The theory of thematic progression focuses on the flow of information between Themes and Rhemes in neighboring clauses. Daneš described three main patterns: constant progression, linear progression, and derived progression. Constant progression occurs when successive clauses develop the same Theme; linear progression occurs when information from the Rheme of one clause becomes the Theme of the following clause; and derived progression occurs when several specific Themes are developed from a common higher-level topic. Later studies expanded and refined these patterns, showing that thematic progression has a sound theoretical basis, although its application requires operational rules that take the structure of the particular discourse into account. [2,8,9].

In practice, thematic progression is analyzed in two ways. Qualitative analysis identifies Themes, Rhemes, and the links between clauses. Quantitative analysis shows how often each progression pattern occurs in the corpus. SOLAS provisions often contain long sentences, conditions, coordinated clauses, and numbered subparagraphs. Therefore, the analysis needs clear rules for dividing the text into units, deciding which clauses can be linked, and assigning each unit to a pattern. These rules make the coding decisions easier to check and help prevent the theoretical patterns from being applied mechanically [10].

2.2 Legal Discourse and Maritime English Research

Legal texts are written by institutions with legal authority. They set out rules and obligations, and each provision serves a specific purpose. Rather than providing general explanation, legal texts prescribe rights and obligations, establish conditions of application, delimit the scope of liability, and arrange procedural consequences. They therefore place particular emphasis on clarity and stability, often reducing interpretive ambiguity through the repetition of legal actors, the restatement of regulated objects, and the

specification of conditions and exceptions. Studies of legal language and legal discourse by Tiersma, Bhatia, and others indicate that the linguistic features of legal texts should be understood in relation to legal institutions, textual genre, and regulatory function rather than as ordinary stylistic choices [3,4].

Thematic progression has been applied to legal discourse to examine the logical development and normative linkage of legal provisions. Constant progression may maintain the stability of a legal actor or regulated object; linear progression may develop an item introduced in a preceding provision into the point of departure for a subsequent provision; and derived progression may divide a higher-level legal topic into specific requirements. Comparative work by Kizil and Kushch on literary and legislative texts, together with Miao's research on legal English discourse, shows that thematic progression is an effective tool for examining information organization and coherence in legal texts. Nevertheless, existing research has focused mainly on constitutions, criminal procedure law, or general legislative texts, while international maritime conventions remain relatively underexplored [11,12].

Research on maritime English provides a specific context for analyzing SOLAS provisions. As a form of English for Specific Purposes, maritime English encompasses such subdomains as navigational communication, technical description, management procedures, and legal regulation. Franceschi notes its multiple register features, combining specialized technical information with institutionalized and normative expression. Borucinsky and Pritchard's study of lexical bundles shows observable linguistic variation across maritime subdomains, while Bocanegra-Valle situates legal genres and language within the maritime domain. As a major safety convention within the International Maritime Organization framework, SOLAS combines the normative character of legal texts with the technical specialization of maritime texts; its organization of information therefore merits separate examination [5-7].

2.3 Theoretical Positioning and Analytical Framework

Thematic-progression research provides a relatively mature framework for examining information flow in texts; legal-discourse research identifies the requirements of clarity, stability, and procedural precision in normative

texts; and maritime-English research emphasizes the technical, institutional, and international communicative character of maritime texts. Yet these three strands have not been sufficiently integrated. Thematic-progression research has rarely examined maritime legal discourse; maritime-English studies have focused mainly on terminology, genre, pedagogy, or translation; and SOLAS research has generally addressed particular syntactic difficulties or translation strategies. Systematic examination of how SOLAS English provisions organize regulatory information through thematic arrangement remains limited.

To address this gap, the present study treats SOLAS English provisions as maritime legal discourse. Drawing on the Theme–Rheme theory of systemic functional linguistics, it examines their information-organizational mechanisms through a classification of thematic progression. SOLAS Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2 are selected as the corpus, covering safety of navigation, special measures to enhance maritime safety, and ship and port facility security, respectively. Although all three chapters belong to the SOLAS framework, they differ in regulated objects and provision functions. Comparing their distributions of thematic-progression patterns therefore makes it possible to observe how different regulatory matters affect topic maintenance, information development, and the allocation of responsibility [1,2].

The classification framework includes the classic patterns of CONSTANT, LINEAR, DERIVED, and SPLIT-RHEME progression, together with OTHER progression. OTHER is not a residual category for provisions that are difficult to classify; rather, it identifies topic shifts that do not constitute classic thematic-progression relations but still perform clear normative functions in SOLAS provisions. Such shifts may reintroduce a legal actor, delimit a condition of application, or move to a different technical matter, thereby reflecting the Convention’s requirements of clarity and regulatory coverage. The analysis therefore considers both the distribution of classic patterns and the proportion and discourse functions of OTHER progression across the three chapters, in order to provide a fuller account of information organization in SOLAS English provisions [2,8,9].

The operational criteria used to distinguish these five categories are summarized in Table 1.

3. Research Design

3.1 Corpus Sources and Research Scope

The corpus is drawn from the English text of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (hereinafter SOLAS), including Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2. Chapter V concerns safety of navigation; Chapter XI-1 sets out special measures to enhance maritime safety; and Chapter XI-2 primarily addresses the security of ships and port facilities. The three chapters share the legal character and linguistic style of SOLAS, but differ in regulatory matters, legal actors, and provision arrangements. They are therefore suitable for comparing how different regulatory contents affect the organization of information. The findings apply only to these three chapters and are not intended to represent all other SOLAS chapters.

The working text is based on the SOLAS English text available through IMO-Vega. Provisions requiring verification were checked against resolutions and errata publicly issued by the International Maritime Organization. Regulation V/23 was corrected in accordance with IMO Resolution MSC.308(88), and the cross-reference in Regulation XI-2/1.4 was corrected in accordance with the errata to the SOLAS 2020 Consolidated Edition issued by the IMO in March 2021. Later consolidated texts were used only for supplementary checking and not as the final basis for determining the correctness of a provision. All checks and corrections were recorded and did not alter the established analytical units or thematic-progression classifications [13-15].

Table 1. Operational Categories of Thematic Progression

Pattern (code)	Criterion
Constant (CONSTANT)	Same Theme continues.
Linear (LINEAR)	Rheme becomes the next Theme.
Derived (DERIVED)	Themes stem from a higher topic.
Split-Rheme (SPLIT RHEME)	Rheme items become later Themes.
Other (OTHER)	No clear relation applies.

In terms of corpus scope, Chapter V was included up to, but not including, its appendix; Chapter XI-1 was included up to Chapter XI-2; and Chapter XI-2 was included through Regulation 13. Contents pages, headers and footers, page numbers, footnotes, appendices, unified interpretations, and editorial notes were excluded

as non-operative material. The resulting corpus contains 461 analytical units: 312 from Chapter V, 58 from Chapter XI-1, and 91 from Chapter XI-2.

3.2 Analytical Units and Coding Framework

SOLAS provisions frequently contain conditional structures, coordinated structures, and numbered subparagraphs; full stops therefore cannot serve as the sole basis for segmentation. This study treats as a basic analytical unit any clause that expresses a relatively complete legal requirement, contains a finite verbal structure, and can be divided into Theme and Rheme. An independent main clause counts as one unit. Coordinated clauses count as separate units when each has its own subject and finite verb and states a different legal requirement. A numbered subparagraph may also count as a separate unit if it has a complete clause with a finite verb. Relative clauses, complement clauses, and non-finite lists that only add information to an earlier clause stay in the same unit as the relevant main clause. Provision titles, numbers, formulae, dimensions, dates, and simple cross-references are not counted separately.

Each unit is assigned one principal topical Theme. In ordinary declarative clauses, the topical Theme is normally the grammatical subject. Where an initial conditional, temporal, or scope-related element serves as the point of departure for the clause, it is coded as a marked Theme or preposed thematic frame, while the legal actor in the main clause is recorded separately. This distinction prevents progression relations from being determined solely by whether grammatical subjects are identical and makes it possible to capture the role of conditions and scope in information organization. Thematic-progression relations are assessed principally within the same Regulation; no relations are artificially established across Regulations. The first unit of each provision sequence is marked INITIAL and excluded from the frequencies and proportions of progression patterns. All remaining units are classified into five categories. CONSTANT applies where the following Theme repeats, substitutes for, or explicitly refers back to the preceding Theme. LINEAR applies where information in the preceding Rheme becomes the Theme of the following unit. DERIVED applies where several specific Themes are derived from a higher-level topic explicitly stated in the text. SPLIT_RHEME applies where a preceding Rheme introduces two or more information items

that are subsequently developed as separate Themes. Units lacking a sufficiently clear relation are classified as OTHER; categories are not imposed merely to fit the classic patterns [2,8,9].

3.3 Annotation and Statistical Methods

For each unit, we record its chapter and Regulation, provision content, topical Theme, Rheme, principal legal actor, antecedent unit, progression type, and reason for the coding decision. We mainly assess links between adjacent units. Sometimes explanatory material or subparagraphs come between two related units. If the original topic clearly continues, we may look back at earlier units within the same Regulation, but no more than three included units. A link must be supported by repeated words, a clear reference, or development from an earlier Rheme into a later Theme. We review units with unclear boundaries or weak evidence more than once. If we still cannot classify a unit reliably, we mark it as OTHER [16,17].

Of the 461 analytical units, 57 are initial units in provision sequences. After INITIAL units are excluded, 404 relations enter the thematic-progression analysis: 276 from Chapter V, 49 from Chapter XI-1, and 79 from Chapter XI-2. Descriptive statistics retain the five categories of CONSTANT, LINEAR, DERIVED, SPLIT_RHEME, and OTHER, and calculate their frequencies and proportions for each chapter. Because DERIVED and SPLIT_RHEME occur infrequently, a conventional chi-square test of all five patterns would produce some low expected frequencies. For inferential analysis, the two rare patterns were therefore combined with OTHER to create three categories: CONSTANT, LINEAR, and OTHER_OR_RARE. Pearson's chi-square test was used to examine the association between chapter and progression pattern, with Cramér's V used to indicate association strength. Pairwise comparisons between chapters applied the Holm adjustment for significance levels, and adjusted standardized residuals were used to identify chapter-pattern combinations that contributed substantially to the overall difference. A fixed-margin Monte Carlo test was also conducted on the complete dataset retaining all five original categories, in order to assess the stability of the results after rare categories were combined. The statistical findings indicate only an association between chapter and pattern distribution; their specific causes require interpretation in light of textual examples [18,19].

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Overall Distribution of Thematic-Progression Patterns

Among the 461 analytical units, 57 are initial units in their respective Regulation or provision sequences. Because these units have no preceding unit available for comparison, they are marked INITIAL and excluded from the statistical analysis of thematic-progression relations. After INITIAL units are excluded, 404 relations remain for analysis. Overall, the thematic progression of SOLAS Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2 is not dominated by a single pattern; rather, CONSTANT, LINEAR, and OTHER show distinct distributions. The overall distribution of the five progression patterns is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Distribution of Thematic-Progression Patterns

Pattern	n (%)
Constant	157 (38.9%)
Linear	89 (22.0%)
Other	154 (38.1%)
Derived	3 (0.7%)
Split-Rheme	1 (0.2%)
Total	404 (100.0%)

As shown in Table 2, CONSTANT occurs 157 times, accounting for 38.9% of all relations; OTHER occurs 154 times, accounting for 38.1%; and LINEAR occurs 89 times, accounting for 22.0%. DERIVED and SPLIT_RHEME occur only three and one times, respectively. Within the present corpus, SOLAS provisions therefore organize information mainly in two ways: by sustaining the same legal actor, regulated object, or provision scope, and by shifting between adjacent units to a new condition, matter, or legal actor. LINEAR progression primarily develops information from a preceding unit into the point of departure for a subsequent provision.

CONSTANT progression helps maintain topical and regulatory stability within a provision. For example, a provision may repeatedly take such regulated objects as the ship security alert system or permanent marking as its point of departure, and then specify their installation, performance, location, or operational requirements. By contrast, OTHER progression often involves a shift from scope of application to the competent authority, from ship category to equipment requirements, or from security level to notification duties. These shifts do not always mean that the provisions are

poorly connected. They may occur because legal provisions address responsibilities, conditions, and separate regulatory matters one by one. Classifying a unit as OTHER does not mean that difficult cases are simply put into a leftover category.

It identifies units that do not display a clear relation of thematic repetition, Rheme-to-Theme development, derivation, or split-Rheme development. To avoid ambiguity, legal texts often restate legal actors, conditions of application, or regulated objects instead of relying entirely on ellipsis and implicit linkage. The high proportion of OTHER therefore reflects the role of explicit expression in ensuring normative clarity and regulatory coverage in SOLAS provisions.

4.2 Differences in Thematic Progression across Chapters

The three chapters display different thematic-progression profiles. Chapter V is characterized mainly by OTHER progression, whereas Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 show higher proportions of CONSTANT and LINEAR progression. These differences correspond to the scope of regulation and the functions of the provisions in each chapter. Chapter V covers a broad range of navigational-safety matters, including meteorological information, ice patrol, search and rescue arrangements, navigational equipment, masters' responsibilities, and navigational records. Its provisions therefore often introduce a new condition, institution, ship type, or technical matter as the point of departure. For example, Regulation 6 first requires ships passing through ice regions to use the Ice Patrol service, and later shifts to such legal actors as "the Contracting Governments" and "the Government of the United States." These units serve the same navigational-safety objective but do not necessarily form a strict relation of thematic repetition or Rheme-to-Theme development.

The regulated objects of Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 are more concentrated, making stable topical chains and progressive chains more likely. Chapter XI-1 develops requirements concerning ship identification numbers, company and registered-owner identification numbers, and continuous synopsis records. For instance, after Regulation 3 introduces "the ship's identification number," subsequent provisions specify its inclusion in certificates, permanent marking, visibility, size, and installation requirements.

Chapter XI-2 records the highest proportion of LINEAR progression, at 34.2%. Its provisions often develop such information as scope of application, decisions, and security assessments from a preceding unit into the point of departure for a subsequent requirement, thereby producing clear procedural progression.

4.3 Discourse Functions of Typical Patterns

The primary function of CONSTANT progression is to maintain the stability of a regulated object or legal actor across successive provisions. Regulation 3 of Chapter XI-1 develops requirements relating to the ship's identification number and its permanent marking, dividing one regulatory object into specific requirements concerning certificate entries, marking location, visibility, and size. Similarly, Regulation 6 of Chapter XI-2 repeatedly uses "the ship security alert system" as its Theme. It sets out requirements for the system's installation, activation, transmission of information, recipients of alerts, and protection against accidental activation. Repeating the Theme makes it clear that each requirement concerns the same system. LINEAR progression often shows how a provision moves from a requirement or decision to its details. One unit introduces the matter, and a later unit takes it as a new Theme to explain how it should be carried out, what it is based on, or what limits apply. In Regulation 3 of Chapter XI-1, one unit requires every ship to have an identification number. Later units use that number as their Theme and explain how it must be recorded on certificates. In Regulation 2 of Chapter XI-2, Contracting Governments make decisions about the application of the provisions. Later units explain the basis for those decisions and state that security levels must not be reduced. In this way, LINEAR progression links a requirement or decision to the provisions that develop it.

OTHER is most common in Chapter V, but this does not necessarily mean that its provisions lack cohesion. The chapter often moves between legal actors, technical matters, and conditions of application. For example, it may move from a ship's obligation to a Contracting Government's obligation, or from a general requirement to one concerning a particular service or piece of equipment. These units still serve the same regulatory goal, even when the next Theme does not repeat the previous Theme or come directly from the previous Rheme.

Here, legal provisions prioritize the explicit specification of separate matters rather than narrative continuity.

DERIVED and SPLIT_RHEME progression occur only rarely, indicating that the three chapters seldom rely on complex higher-level topic structures. The provisions on amendment procedures for different parts of the RO Code in Regulation 1 of Chapter XI-1 may be treated as a SPLIT_RHEME relation. Regulation 13 of Chapter XI-2, which addresses the withdrawal, deletion, and addition of entries in the list of port facility security plans, may be regarded as involving items derived from a shared topic of change. Given their limited frequencies, these two patterns are described only qualitatively and are not overinterpreted.

4.4 Statistical Tests and Discussion

To determine whether observed differences between chapters exceed sampling variation, a Pearson chi-square test was conducted for the association between chapter and thematic-progression pattern. Because DERIVED and SPLIT_RHEME occurred infrequently, they were combined with OTHER to form three categories for inferential analysis: CONSTANT, LINEAR, and OTHER_OR_RARE. Cramér's V was used to assess association strength, and Holm-adjusted pairwise comparisons were conducted to identify significant differences. The main inferential test results are summarized in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, chapter and thematic-progression pattern are significantly associated, $\chi^2(4, N = 404) = 30.513, p < .001$, although the association is small to moderate (Cramér's $V = .194$) [18].

Table 3. Inferential Test Results

Test	Result
Pearson chi-square	$\chi^2(4, N = 404) = 30.513, p < .001$
Cramér's V	.194
Pairwise tests	Chapter V vs XI-1/XI-2: significant; XI-1 vs XI-2: n.s.
Stability check	Monte Carlo: all five categories retained

Pairwise comparisons show significant differences between Chapter V and Chapter XI-1, and between Chapter V and Chapter XI-2, while the difference between Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 is not significant. Adjusted standardized residuals further indicate that OTHER_OR_RARE is

higher than expected in Chapter V, whereas CONSTANT and LINEAR are lower than expected; LINEAR is higher than expected in Chapter XI-2, whereas OTHER_OR_RARE is lower than expected. These findings are consistent with the textual observations: Chapter V covers a broader range of regulatory matters and displays more frequent topic shifts, while Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 more often develop concentrated matters concerning identification, records, security systems, and notification procedures [18].

The differences in thematic progression are therefore not merely formal linguistic differences, but are related to the regulated objects and provision functions of the three chapters. Chapter V performs a broad navigational-safety function and must cover diverse situations and technical requirements, so new topical starting points occur more frequently. Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 regulate more concentrated matters and are more likely to form stable thematic chains or progressive chains developed from preceding Rhemes. Thematic progression thus provides a specific entry point for examining information organization in maritime legal discourse and for showing how different regulatory contents shape the development of legal texts.

5. Conclusion

This study examines how normative information is connected and developed in the English provisions of SOLAS Chapters V, XI-1, and XI-2. It applies a unified framework of analytical units, Theme-identification criteria, and thematic-progression categories. The findings show that thematic progression in SOLAS provisions does not rely on a single pattern, but takes different configurations of CONSTANT, LINEAR, and OTHER progression. CONSTANT progression helps maintain the stability of legal actors and regulated objects; LINEAR progression develops information from a preceding unit into a subsequent requirement; and OTHER progression marks the explicit introduction of new conditions, matters, and legal actors.

The chapter-level comparison shows that Chapter V contains a higher proportion of OTHER progression, reflecting the need for navigational-safety provisions to cover diverse situations, technical matters, and legal actors, and thus to shift topics more frequently. Chapters XI-1 and XI-2 contain more CONSTANT and LINEAR progression. Their provisions on identification,

records, and security tend to focus on a smaller set of regulated objects. This makes it easier for the same Theme to continue across clauses or for information from one clause to become the Theme of the next. Statistical tests also show significant differences in thematic progression across the three chapters. The main differences are between Chapter V and the two other chapters. These patterns show how legal provisions connect information. They also reflect what each provision regulates, who is responsible, and what the provision aims to achieve.

From a translation perspective, the study translates thematic-progression analysis into an information-chain approach to maritime legal translation. Before translating, translators may identify the scope of a provision, the legal actor, the relation between successive units, and the legally decisive information that must remain explicit in the target text. This form of source-text analysis helps avoid an exclusive focus on terminology and syntax at the expense of normative links between provisions, and provides a structured reference for understanding SOLAS English provisions, maritime legal translation, and related teaching. Recent legal-translation research also emphasizes the importance of textual, methodological, and domain-specific competence in quality-assured translation workflows [20-23].

As a chapter-level comparative study centered on source texts, the present research also provides opportunities for further development. Future studies may expand the corpus to compare thematic-progression patterns across other SOLAS chapters and different maritime conventions. More refined operational criteria and cross-coding procedures may further deepen the analysis of complex provisions. Comparative English-Chinese translation analysis, translator-review cases, and readability research may also be used to examine the practical value of the information-chain approach to maritime legal translation.

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