THE TEXTUAL METAFUNCTION OF THE MESSAGE: IDENTIFYING THEMES IN SPECIAL THEMATIC STRUCTURES

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When we look at language from the point of view of the textual metafunction, we are trying to see how speakers construct their message in order to fit in the text (or in a conversation). According to functional grammar, there are three ways in which textual meanings are constructed in a text: repetition, conjunction and thematization. Repetition includes the repetition of the same word in one paragraph. This is called „lexical repetition”. However, it also includes more „grammatical” kinds of repetition of meaning which may be expressed by different words or expressions. The role of repetition is to show that different parts of the text are related to each other in some way. By using repetition we emphasize that the text maintains the same topic. Otherwise, it would be difficult for the hearers to understand the message of the text. Although repetition signals what parts of a text are related, conjunction is the function which shows how these parts are related to each other. This is clearest when it is used a conjunction such as ‘because’ to relate two clauses:

We haven’t met because she is on holiday.

Conjunctive Adjuncts, such as ‘therefore’, and certain unspecific nouns, such as ‘reason’ can also perform the same kind of function.

Conjunctions and repetition work especially between two or more clauses, but thematization is different in that it doesn’t relate to the way the individual components are expressed, but to the structure of the clause – the order in which elements appear in the clause. The Theme of a clause is simply the first element of the clause. Halliday defines Theme „as the element which serves as the point of departure of the message”\(^2\). When choosing the starting point for a clause, the speakers select that part which will make easier for the listeners to link the clause to the previous ones, to see how the new information will fit in the information that has already been said. This is why the most important problem is represented by how far we can push the boundary of Theme in certain cases. In this article I have worked with the criteria for identifying Theme developed by Halliday and Matthiessen in An Introduction to Functional Grammar. The most important criterion is that Theme goes up to and can include the first experiential element in the clause. Due to this criterion Theme should normally include an unmarked Theme which functions as Subject. This generally means that, if there is a marked Theme in the sentence, the following Subject (unmarked Theme) is also included. In this approach, the marked Theme is seen as ‘Contextual’ frame’ or ‘Orienting Theme’ and it is considered that marked Theme can change the textual framework. On the other hand, unmarked Theme maintains the topic of the text.
In order to analyse the special thematic structures we will examine the ways in which the speaker can manipulate the structure of her message for establishing specific kinds of starting points.

1. Thematic equatives

Basic types of Themes consist of a single clause constituent. However, there is a textual resource in English according to which speaker can group together more than one element of the message as a single constituent, and then use that ‘multi-element constituent’ as Theme, having the function of Subject. These structures are traditionally called ‘a pseudo-cleft’, but Halliday and Matthiessen prefer to call „thematic equative”.

e.g. What I’m going to do is to leave the country.
What I want to talk about is the evolution of man.
All I want is a trip to Miami.
What we didn’t realize was that he had already left.
What happened was that John stole the car and ran away.

**Equative Theme**

**Rheme**

Halliday and Matthiessen used the term ‘thematic equative’ because the Theme-Rheme structure is expressed in these constructions in the form „Theme=Rheme”, with „=” expressed by the Predicator „be”. These constructions are actually a type of relational identifying clauses in which the embedded Wh-clause always acts as a Value. Most of the above examples could be reformulated so as to distribute the components of the message in their normal positions.

e.g. Now I’m going to leave the country.

Note that a rewriting of the final example does not use any of the words from the Theme because none of the specific components of the message are placed in Theme: the writer’s starting point is simply ‘something happened’.

e.g. John stole the car and ran away.

Examples like this show that more or less any combination of the meaning components can be grouped in a single constituent which functions as Theme.

An important aspect of the possibility of rewriting equative Themes is given by the comparison between Wh-clauses as Themes and Wh-interrogative clauses. In both cases the Wh-element represents a ‘gap’ In the case of the interrogative clauses the gap will be filled in by the addressee while in thematic equatives it is the speaker who completes the message by filling the gap. This comparison helps us understand why a speaker might use a thematic equative. In a sense, the starting point in a thematic equative is often a question that the speaker imagines the hearer might want to ask at that stage in a text. The easiest way to understand this is to
take into consideration the context of the examples. For instance, a sentence like *What the book does not present is the method of development in the text* can be considered as being part of a book review. It is clear that the reviewer does not like the book as a whole. He pointed out some positive aspects of the book, but the example above signals some negative remarks. While writing the review, the author imagined what questions a reader might ask: „What won’t I learn here?“. The writer takes this question as a starting point of the message, signaling in the Theme that the Rheme will answer this question.

In other cases, especially in speech, the equative Themes split the message into two parts in order to be easier for the hearer to process the information given by the Theme („staging” information). The Theme as starting point is divided off from the Rheme in a way that is more obvious than in the corresponding non-equative version which allows the hearer to process each part separately. This applies to the second example from above *What I want to talk about is the evolution of man*. Theme generally serves to orient the speaker or the reader and equative Theme evidently does this. Both the functions we mentioned – asking questions and staging the information – make explicit the interactive consideration of the audience.

We can have a Wh-clause functioning as Theme, but it is also possible to have it in Rheme position.

e.g. This is not what I want.  
Sewing is what she does best.  
**Theme** | **Rheme**

Such clauses are, in fact, the marked versions of thematic equatives. These marked thematic equatives often occur with pronouns (for example ‘this’) in Theme, which refer back to what has been said in the immediately previous message. Even when the Theme is not expressed by a pronoun, the Theme normally relates back to a previous meaning.

### 2. Predicated Themes

One key feature of thematic equatives is that they can group more than one element of the message into a single clause constituent, and can then function as Theme (or as Rheme in marked cases). Besides this type of construction, there is another type that allows the speaker to pick out one element and give it an emphatic thematic characteristic. These structures are traditionally called ‘cleft sentences’, but Halliday and Matthiessen called them „predicated Themes“.

e.g. It is not the technology which is wrong.  
It is we who made the mistake using it.  
It is not only our engine that is refined.  
It was not until 1986 that we finally finish our house.  
It was pure luck that we noticed the money was stolen.
As the examples above show, the clause constituent which occurs in predicated Theme may be Subject (examples 1-2), Complement (example 2) or Adjunct (examples 3-4).

As we mentioned before, Subject is the natural choice for Theme, so it might seem unnecessary to use a specialized structure to place it in Theme position. But notice what happens if we rewrite the first two examples in order to remove the predicated Theme.

e.g. The technology is not wrong. We made the mistake when using it.

We can notice that by rephrasing the sentences we lost the contrast between the two subjects. In speech we can draw attention to this contrast by intonation, but in writing this is not possible and the tendency would be for the reader to assume that the emphasis is on the last words: ‘wrong’ and ‘using’ which is unmarked pattern in English. In these examples predicated Theme guides the reader towards a particular pattern in English. More generally, predicated Theme has the role to indicate that the predicated constituent is noteworthy in some way because it contrasts with another part of the text or because it is represented as selected form a number of alternatives.

3. Thematised comment

Another special thematic structure, which is in some ways similar to predicated Theme, allows speakers to start their message with their own comments on the validity of their own statement. These structures express “explicit objective modality and appraisal”\(^5\). For example:

e.g. *It is true* that it took us a long time to finish the task.

The main information in this sentence is ‘it took us a long time to finish the task’, an assertion which is considered to be true. The main similarity with predicated Theme is that in both cases the ‘it’ acts as a place for the Subject of the Predicator ‘be’ in the first clause. The real Subject is in the second clause. The main difference is that, the comment in the ‘it’ clause is not a meaning component of the second clause and it is not possible to rewrite them in the form of a single clause as we were able to do with examples of Predicated Theme.

e.g. *It’s not the technology that is wrong* = the Technology is not wrong (Predicated Theme).

It is true it took us a long time to finish the task = not possible (thematised Theme).

However, this still involves a grammatical operation, the use of ‘it’ as the part of sentence which sets up the starting point of the message represented by the
speaker’s comment. Speaker’s attitude is a natural starting point, and thematised comment is very common in many kinds of discourse.

e.g. It’s interesting that you should say that.  
    It is difficult to know how old she is.  
    It is regretted that the University doesn’t have enough funds.  
    **Theme**  
    **Rheme**

I have to mention that there are some linguists such as Halliday, Martin and Matthiessen who consider that Theme is represented only by ‘it’. However, I consider that it is more logical to include the comment in the Theme. The thematised comment occurs at the key points in the text, and the method of development of the Theme becomes more difficult if we consider that Theme is represented only by ‘it’.

**4. Preposed Theme**

The preposed Theme occurs almost only in writing that imitates speech. In such cases Themes appear as separate constituents, and then they can substitute a pronoun in the appropriate place in the following clause.

The preposed Theme is normally a nominal element and it generally functions as Subject. This type of Theme occurs in declaratives, but can also occur in interrogatives.

e.g. Happiness, this is what life is about.  
    People like us, we have to be careful to economical crisis.  
    Your mum, does she know you missed the exam?  
    **Theme**  
    **Rheme**

**5. Themes in passive clauses**

Passivization is the transformation which allows the movement of a particular constituent into Theme position. In most cases, there are several reasons for choosing passive rather than active; but there are some cases where the influence of Theme choice is relatively dominant. This is clearest where the Agent who performs the action is explicitly mentioned in a prepositional phrase with „by” because in this case both potential Subjects are present. For example:

The children had got on the wrong bus. *They* were rescued by a woman who saw them crying. *She* took them back home on another bus.

One reason for the passive form in the second sentence is that it enables the writer to maintain the starting point „the children” which is carried over the previous sentence. The other character, „a woman” is introduced in the Rheme of the second sentence, and it can be used as a natural starting point for the third
sentence. We will weaken this sequence of sentences by switching the active and the passive forms:

The children had got on the wrong bus. A woman who saw them crying rescued them. They were taken back home by her on another bus.

This version is coherent, but it seems less natural.

6. Theme in clause complexes

So far we have concentrated on Themes in simple sentences. We think it would be interesting what happens in a clause complex which consists of two or more clauses. When a dependent clause in a clause complex precedes the clause on which it depends, it is more logical to analyse the dependent clause as the Theme for the whole clause complex. For example,

As she was approaching the house, a young man attacked her.

If we follow strictly the rule that every sentence has a Theme, we will analyse the sentence as below:

As she was approaching the house, a young man attacked her.

- Theme
- Rheme

However, if we compare this sentence with the following, the dependent clause seems to function in a very similar way to the Adjunct in the second sentence:

One second after the attack, he ran away.

Theme
Rheme

The different analyses of the dependent clause show different aspects of what was going on. If we analyse both sentences together, we will get the following structure:

As she was approaching the house, a young man attacked her.

- Theme
- Rheme
- Theme
- Rheme
- Theme
- Rheme

For practical reasons this detailed analysis is not used. When we analyse a text the way in which the Themes work to signal ‘the method of development’ of the text emerges more clearly if dependent clauses in initial position are taken as the point of departure for the whole clause complex. This means that the first analysis is preferable. This applies to both finite and finite clause:

e.g. After the police arrived I brought them to the suspect.
Since she had already left I decided to read for several hours.
Having said that he left the room.
Without saying anything the child put his head under the pillow.
Although she was rich she didn’t spend any money on charity.

Theme Rheme

There are two practical points about analyzing Theme in this way that should be borne in mind. The first is that a dependent clause following the clause in which it depends normally does not need its Theme identified if you are analyzing a text. We have assumed that the dependent clause represents the starting point for the whole clause complex, being equivalent to a constituent of the dominant clause. When the dominant clause comes first, Theme of a clause functions as Theme for the whole clause complex, including the dependent clause. In the examples below there are underlined the dependent clauses in Rhemes.

e.g. My father died when I was young.
I will do it because you are not able to.
Down she ran the slope, where some scream could be heard.

Theme Rheme

The second point is the question of what happens where there is more than one dominant clause. In these cases we have to identify more than one Theme. Fries (1981) argues that the most powerful unit for analyzing Theme in a text is the T-unit; that is an independent clause together with all the clauses that are dependent on it. Thus, if a sentence has more than one main clause (independent), there will be two T-units, each with their own Theme. In the following examples the underlined parts represent the Themes and the T-units are separated by slashes.

When you talked I was thinking of something else, // and you may consider this very rude.
Then, as the meeting was over, the shareholders left the building in a hurry // and the management remained to evaluate the critical situation.

We can conclude that, besides the basic types of Themes in declarative and non-declarative sentences, there are also some types of special Themes which are identified by establishing the specific kinds of starting points. These special Themes allow the identification of the way thematic choices contribute to signaling the organization of the text.

NOTES
1 Winter 1982: 56.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


ABSTRACT

In this paper we analyze language from the point of view of textual metafunction, trying to see how speakers construct their message. Our concern is not with the basic types of Themes, but with special thematic structures. We begin by examining ways in which the speaker can manipulate the structure of the message in order to establish specific kinds of starting points. The special constructions that we analyze in this paper are: Thematic equatives, Predicated Themes, Thematized comment, Preposed Themes, Themes in Passive clauses, Theme in clause complexes, pointing out the methods of identifying them.

**Key words**: metafunction, thematization, thematic structure