

A Functional Approach to the Status of Theme and Textual Development*

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Abstract—Theme is defined as the starting point for the message, the information contained within Themes correlates with the method of textual development, and contributes to the production of a coherent discourse. The present research takes an anecdote as the data, making an analysis about how the experiential, interpersonal and textual Theme elements are distributed in the anecdote and how they propel the text development, and how such choice and distribution of Themes lead to the realization of the communicative goal of the story.

Index Terms—theme, coherent discourse, social goal

I. INTRODUCTION

A central Hallidayan idea is that the meaning of any text is a product of three metafunctions which are experiential, interpersonal and textual function. Textual function is concerned with the ordering of information, with what comes first, last and in the middle, with what links the parts of a piece of writing to each other so as to create a coherent discourse, systemicists are interested in two systems of textual meaning: Theme + Rheme and Given + New (Eggins, 1994). Halliday (1985, p.39) defines Theme as the element which serves as “the starting point for the message: it is what the clause is going to be about”. It is recognised that such concept is useful in the study of text development method. Fries claims that the information that is contained within the Themes of the various sentences of a passage correlates with the method of development of the passage (Fries, 1983). The continuous choice of Themes in the process of discourse production is not random but manifests how the information central to the discourse is arranged so as to produce a coherent discourse. Since Theme contains known or given information, i.e. information which has already been mentioned in the text, or can be figured out from the context, and it is typical that we depart from places we are familiar with, Theme often occupies the initial position of sentence. However, it is not always the case that Theme coincides with Given while New falls within the Rheme, the opposite is also common, especially in spoken English where new information occurs at the beginning and is signalled by prosodic prominence (Downing, 2001).

Theme identification is usually based on order, it is the element which comes first in the clause, Rheme is the part that follows in which Theme is developed. The development of Themes and Rhemes propel the text to develop forward and provide continuity in discourse, this is referred to as Thematic Progression which is firstly put forward by Czechoslovakian linguist Frantisek Danes (1974). From then on, researches have been done concerning the status of Theme and Thematic progression, etc. in varying discourses. Francis (1990) compared news reports, editorials, and letters from newspapers in terms of transitivity and mainly discussed the choice of participants and processes as Theme of clauses. Nwogu (1989) investigated medical texts to find its features of Thematic Progression patterns. Zhao Jian-cheng, Yu Yu-guo (1993) studied the characteristics of Thematic progression patterns in English car advertisements. Martinez (2003) compared the choice of Theme in the sections of method and discussion of biology articles from academic journals.

All researches indicate Theme is not randomly chosen, but is writer-selected taking the genre needs into account in constructing text. Intended for different imaginary or authentic audience groups, different genres of texts will lay stress on different aspects, thus are developed in different ways. Martin (1984) defines genre as a goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture. Genre is the means by which we use language to achieve various communicative goals and represent an event or set of events. Communicative purpose of events is a key factor in the creation of genre and makes some type of texts have the same structure in a general way. This paper will analyze a narration about Einstein and his driver from the textbook of *College English*, the story is in the genre of anecdote, it is written not only to tell what happened but also to introduce the multi-faceted personality of Einstein and his driver to reach the social goal of entertaining readers. By the analysis of the choice of Theme elements and Thematic structures both at syntactic and textual level, the present research is mainly aimed at answering three questions:

1. What are the Theme types employed by the story writer?
2. How are the experiential, interpersonal and textual Theme elements distributed in the anecdote and how do they propel the text development?
3. How does such choice of Themes contribute to the realization of the social goal of the story?

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II. DEFINITION AND CLASSIFICATION OF THEMES

A. Definition of Theme

Within the framework of functional grammar, clause is the basic unit of discourse analysis. Thompson (2000) states in his monograph *Introducing Functional Grammar* that “a clause is (potentially) any stretch of language centered around a verbal group” (p.16). Halliday (1985) defines thematic structure primarily for clause which is composed of Theme and Rheme and is one of the means to achieve the cohesion of text. As a key component of clause, Theme is defined as what is being talked about, the point of departure for the clause as a message, the remainder of the message that develops Theme is called Rheme in Prague School terminology. “The major function Theme serves is to locate and orient the clause within its context (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004, p.64); it is the ground from which the clause is taking off. As orienter to the message of each clause and the departure point from which the speaker/writer proceeds, the choice and ordering of Themes, as well as the hyperthemes of the superior text units---the paragraphs, can create textual meaning and establish interaction between readers and writers, and fulfill the social purpose of a discourse. Putting all Themes together, we may easily catch the writer’s trail of thought and his way of text development. The main Thematic thread run through the Thematic content of component sentences, and can be perceived as the method of text development.

B. Experiential, Interpersonal and Textual Theme

According to the thematic content and what function it performs, Theme can be divided into three categories, they are experiential, interpersonal and textual Theme.

(1) Experiential \Topical Theme

According to Halliday (1985), experiential Theme represents human experience, inner world, conceptions mostly obtained by people from the outside world. The topical or experiential element in a multiple theme is the obligatory constituent, a representative of experiential elements a transitivity part involves. In a sentence, experiential Theme invariably occurs in the initial position followed by Rheme, it can be the participants, temporal adjuncts or adverbials, etc. In functional terminology, it can be Actor---the subject of a material process, or Circumstance which is realized mostly by the adverbial or prepositional phrase in all different process, or Senser---subject or object of a mental process, for example:

TABLE 1
ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENTIAL THEME

He	chased three squirrels just now.
On the university campus	they dance every evening.
I	hate telling you the truth.
Theme	Rhyme

Theme can be further divided into marked and unmarked Theme. If Theme element conflates with the subject of the clause, it is unmarked Theme. Otherwise, it is marked Theme. The unmarked Theme is realized by i) the Subject of the declarative clause, ii) the finite verbal operator plus Subject in the yes/no question, iii) Wh-word or group in wh-question, iv) the thematic equative and v) the initial element in the imperative clause and the exclamatory clause as illustrated in Table 2 below.

TABLE 2
ANALYSIS OF UNMARKED THEME

Mary	is a top student.
Do you	like English?
What topic	did you choose?
What you need to do	is to make a response.
How beautiful	The girl is!
Unmarked Theme	Rhyme

(2) Interpersonal Theme

By interpersonal, it is meant interaction between writers and readers. Interpersonal Theme is composed of vocative, modal and mood-making elements (Halliday, 2000). A vocative is an item used to address, it may appear in any position of the clause and is thematic if it appears before topical Theme. A modal adjunct like *surprisingly*, *frankly*. etc becomes a modal Theme when it occurs before the topical Theme. Such modal adjuncts convey to readers the speakers’ judgment of the relevance or truth value of their message. They can be regarded as the comment on the message rather than the content itself (Thompson, 2000, p.134-135). Finite verbal operator like *would*, *can*, etc. also serves as the interpersonal Theme.

TABLE 3
ANALYSIS OF INTERPERSONAL THEME

Unfortunately	the doctor	hasn't left an address.
Would	you	like this teapot?
Mary, Mary won't	you	marry me?
Interpersonal Theme	Experiential Theme	Rhyme

(3) Textual Theme

Textual theme is used to arrange information in a certain order. There are three types: continuative, conjunctive and structural Theme. Continuatives refer to the discourse markers such as *yes, no, well, oh, now*, etc which signal the beginning of a new move in the exchange, if more than one textual element is present, they occur in the order of continuative, conjunction, conjunctive, for example, '*Well but on the other hand...*' (Thompson, 2000, p.136). Conjunctions such as *and, but* obviously work primarily between two or more clauses, join two clauses into one sentence and indicate the types of semantic relationships. Conjunctive adjuncts do not link the clause into a larger structural unit, but link the content of the clause to that of other clauses without forming part of the content, and show how two sentences relate to each other through the use of *alternatively, as a result*, etc., they relate the clause to the preceding text, signal how the clause as a whole fits in with the preceding text.

C. Theme Types

According to the constituents of a Theme, it can be classified into simple Theme, multiple Theme and clausal Theme.

(1) Simple Theme

Simple theme is "the Theme of a clause that is composed of only one structural element and it is realized usually by only one element---one nominal, prepositional or adverbial component" (Halliday, 1994, p. 39). It is an independent unit which can no longer be further divided into smaller functional unit. For example:

My brother (T) | has been assigned that task by the teacher.

Very carefully (T) | she put him back on his feet again.

On weekend days (T) | I go back home from school.

(2) Multiple Theme

Multiple Theme is the Theme that consists of topical Theme together with anything else that comes before it (Halliday, 1994, p.53). According to its semantic constituents, multiple Theme can be further divided into three types of Themes, namely, the experiential, interpersonal, and textual Theme. In a multiple Theme, the Theme of the clause ends with the first constituent that is participant, circumstance, process and it extends from the beginning of the clause up to the first element that has a function in transitivity, which means that the last constituent in a multiple Theme has to be an experiential or topical Theme. The element that comes before the topical Theme can vary from elements which are textual and /or interpersonal in function.

TABLE 4
ANALYSIS OF MULTIPLE THEME

Not surprisingly,	Then,	its operations	were viewed with admiration.
interpersonal	textual	experiential	
Theme			

(adapted from Thompson, 2000:137)

(3) Clausal Theme

Clausal Theme, as the term indicates, means a clause serves as the Theme. Halliday (1985, 1994) defines thematic structure largely for the clause, but makes it clear that other units like clause complex also has thematic structures. A clause complex is a combination of clauses linked together by conjunctions that indicate the logical relationships between clauses. Clause-complex can be classified into two types: paratactic clause-complex and hypotactic clause-complex. If a clause-complex is a combination of two or more equal clauses, it is a paratactic clause-complex. If the combination is made up of clauses with unequal status, it is a hypotactic clause-complex. In the clause-complex, the clause that takes the initial position in the clause complex is given the Theme status, and at the same time Halliday (1994) states that there will still be a thematic structure in each of all the constituent clauses (p.57). The following examples illustrate the two means of identifying clausal Theme.

John ran away, (T) | and Fred stayed behind(R).

John (T) | ran away (R) || and Fred (T) | stayed behind (R).

In analyzing a text, to signal more clearly the method of text development, we can choose any of the two ways of analysis, either to identify the dependent clause in initial position as the Theme or the subject of the clause as Theme, different analyses indicate different aspects of what is going on.

III. ANALYSIS OF THE STATUS OF THEME IN TEXT DEVELOPMENT OF THE ANECDOTE

The selected data is an anecdote about Einstein and his driver. An anecdote includes abstract, orientation, crisis,

reaction and coda (Harmond et al., 1992; Gerot & Wignell, 1994). Orientation is the introduction of the background information, crisis is the climax of the story, reaction is how the crisis is settled and coda is the reflection or moral lessons we can draw from the story. The lexical-grammatical features are as follows: 1) The use of rhetorical questions, exclamations, emphatic elements such as *really*, *quite*, etc. 2) Material process or behavioral process in the transitivity system to express what happens. 3) The use of temporal adjuncts. 4) The use of additive adjuncts. 5) The use of causal adjuncts. 6) The use of mental process to show how the story teller feels. 7) The use of expressions that describe the storyteller's attitude or judgment. An essential feature of a narration is the arranging of events and incidents into a tellable sequence through the use of temporal, additive, causal and conjunctive adjuncts, in addition to mental process, material process and behavioural process which tell the details about what happens in the story, of course the author's personal judgment and attitude are also to be revealed through the use of comment adjuncts also called interpersonal Theme elements. The present research mainly focus on the discussion of the function of different Theme elements in text development and the realization of social goal, we will not only analyze reasons for choosing certain constituents as Themes, but also explore how Theme choices at the level of clause and clause complex throughout the text signal its underlying coherence, and reach the social goal of entertaining readers.

Since Theme is the orienter to the message of each clause, the departure point from which the speaker proceeds, we should expect the writer to begin most of the clauses with various temporal adjuncts, conjunctions, conjunctive adjuncts and referring expressions to tell place, time, characters and so on, for they are supposed to be the most important elements that constitute a story. It turns out that the general picture of the distributions of Themes well confirms our assumption, as the statistical figure from Table 5 indicates among 28 Themes (that include 15 simple Themes, 9 complex Themes, and 4 clausal Themes), there are 27 experiential Theme elements which refer to either the participants or the circumstance, there are 6 interpersonal Themes through which the storyteller tells to his readers his personal attitude and comment on what happened, and 5 textual Themes which establish inter-sentential logical relationships and coherence. The Thematic content shows that the writer employs more experiential elements to convey the information about participants and circumstance. In this section, we will discuss how the choice of Themes and Thematic content contribute to the creation of textual meaning and helps to fulfill the social purpose. For the sake of clarity, each Theme has been given a number.

TABLE 5
DISTRIBUTION OF DIFFERENT THEME TYPES AND THEME ELEMENTS

Theme types	No	Examples of Themes in the anecdote		Subtypes of each Theme type	Total
Simple Themes	15	1. At one time 2. He (Einstein) 3. The driver 4. which (the lecture) 5. One day 6. he (the driver) 7. he (the driver)	8. he (the driver) 9. Einstein 11. The driver 12. That evening 13. Nobody 21. The driver 26. he (the driver) 27. the question	Experiential Themes (12+3): Participants (12) circumstances (3)	Experiential elements (12+3+8+4 =27) Interpersonal elements (5+1=6)
Complex Themes	9	10. why don't you 15. Then he 16. Sure enough, he 18. Then he 19. while Einstein 22. Of course he	23. but he 24. as if he 28. In fact, in order to show how simple it was,	Experiential Themes: participants (8) Interpersonal Themes: comment (5) Textual Themes: (5)	Textual elements (5)
Clausal Themes	4	14. As the driver took his place on the stage 17. It was a great success, and when it was over, 20. Just before they got to the door, 25. When the man stopped talking,		Experiential circumstantial Themes: (4) Interpersonal Themes: (1)	

A. Distribution of Different Theme Types in the Narration

All the three Theme types occur but with different frequency. As is shown there are 15 simple Themes accounting for about 53.57% of the total as listed in Table 6. Among the 15 simple Themes, *1. At one time*, *5. One day*, *12. That evening* are circumstantial elements talking about the time, the other 12 are participant elements about Einstein, his smart driver, the lecture and the question asked by one of the audience without which the story can not be a complete one.

TABLE 6
DISTRIBUTION OF SIMPLE THEMES

1. At one time	8.he(the driver)	Circumstantial elements(3) Participant elements (12) {the driver(7) +Einstein(2) +the lecture (1) +Nobody(1) +the question(1)}
2. He (Einstein)	9.Einstein	
3.The driver	11.The driver	
4.which(the lecture)	12.That evening	
5.One day	13.Nobody	
6.he(the driver)	21.The driver	
7.he(the driver)	26.he(the driver)	
	27.the question	

Complex Themes are composed of at least two of the three kinds of the elements---textual, interpersonal and experiential elements, through the use of interpersonal elements, the author can make his personal judgments or comments on what happened to create interaction between the author and his readers. As Table 7 indicates, there are 9 complex Themes. 10, 16, 22, 24 are composed of experiential participant elements and interpersonal elements, the other 5 are made up of textual and experiential Theme elements through which the author not only tells the story itself, but also makes his own comment on what happened to the driver, as if telling the story face-to-face with readers, thus drawing closer the distance. For example, by 16. Sure enough, he, the author shows his strong confidence in the driver giving the lecture in the place of Einstein because he had listened to the lecture again and again, then by 22. Of course he, the author suggests that he is quite sure that the driver did not understand the question asked by one of the audience, thus creating the suspense. Then by 23. but he, the author brings about a natural transition with the textual element of but and interpersonal element of as if in 24, to tell readers that the driver pretended to understand the question, then in complex Theme 28. In fact, in order to show how simple it was, the author deliberately chooses the phrase In fact to show the driver's pretension of relaxation and his casualness with which he comes up with a solution to the crisis. The driver said that to show how simple the question was, he would ask his driver to answer it. Readers will be deeply impressed by the driver's wise and stoical way of coping with the awkward situation. In this way the author not only amused readers, but also arouses readers' admiration for the driver's quick-mindedness and sense of humour, in fact interpersonal elements, in spite of its limited number, do play a critical role in the fulfillment of social goals.

TABLE 7
DISTRIBUTION OF COMPLEX THEMES

10.why don't you	22.Of course he
15.Then he	23.but he
16.Sure enough, he	24. as if he
18.Then he	28. In fact, in order to show
19.while Einstein	how simple it was,

There are 4 clausal Themes which are marked ones. 14, 20, 25, and one part of the complex Theme 17. when it was over are the circumstantial elements, which set the information that comes after in the story in a sequenced time frame (Thompson, 2000: 131), they indicate the time order in which the story happened. In complex Theme 17, besides the circumstantial element, the interpersonal element tells the author's personal comment on the driver's lecture and comes in the initial position which means what comes after will be centered around the success of the lecture, so that driving readers to continue their reading to know what happened later.

14. As the driver took his place on the stage

17. It was a great success, and when it was over

20. Just before they got to the door,

25. When the man stopped talking,

B. The Status of Theme and Textual Development

Thompson (2000) states that in the analysis of a text, the way Themes work to signal the method of text development emerges clearly if we identify temporal clause as the point of departure for the whole clause complex, therefore, when identifying the Themes of clause complex that contains temporal clause which comes at the initial position, the whole temporal clause is considered to be the circumstantial element of the whole sentence. We notice that besides the temporal clause, the writer mainly uses temporal adjuncts including circumstantial Adjuncts of time and Conjunctive Adjuncts of time in Theme position. In other words, these temporal adverbials have been Thematized and become the Marked Themes of clauses. The succession of Thematized Adjuncts of time are used to indicate the time frame for the text development. Throughout the whole text, we can see that Themes 1, 5, 12, 15, 18 and 19 all begin with the Thematized elements of time, in 14, 17, 20 and 25, temporal clauses are part of the complex Themes.

1. At one time Einstein traveled all over the United States giving lectures.

5. One day he told Einstein that he knew the lecture so well that he was sure that he could give it himself.

12. That evening two of them went along to the lecture hall.

14. As the driver took his place on the stage everybody clapped.

15. Then he began the lecture

17.....and when it was over,

18. Then he started to leave, shaking hands with everybody,

19....while Einstein followed quietly a few steps behind.

20. Just before they got to the door,

25. When the man stopped talking,

It is apparent that all the Themes pertain to the experiential meaning of time, indicating the time sequence of the story: One day→That evening→ As the driver took his place on the stage→ Then he→ ... when it was over→ Then he→ ... while Einstein→ Just before they got to the door,→ When the man stopped talking. At the same time, participants including Einstein, the driver, the lecture, the man who asked the question also occupy the Theme position. The writer uses proper names, personal pronouns, non-personal pronouns and nouns referring to the main participants in the Theme position, 20 out of the 27 experiential Theme elements refer to participants, the iterative selection of the driver and Einstein as the Themes indicates that they both are important participants. These Themes also serve as the Subjects of the sentences, they are unmarked Themes and provide a departure point for the interpretation of the rest of the message.

It is worth notice that 14 out of the 20 participant Theme elements are the driver, while Einstein is mentioned only 3 times, the remaining 3 are which (the lecture), Nobody, the question which means that the driver is the hero rather than the scientist in this story. Nobody is chosen to be in the Theme position as in the sentence *Nobody there had seen Einstein before* for the purpose of emphasizing that none of the people who came to attend the lecture had seen Einstein before, this set the stage for the creation of humour.

C. Realization of Social Goals through the Interpersonal Theme Elements

This story is in the genre of anecdote, according to Hammond et al. (1992) and Groot & Wignell (1994), the communicative function of anecdote is to share with others the unusual and interesting event, this story is told to entertain audience by showing the wisdom of the driver. It is noticed that there are in total 6 interpersonal Theme elements as listed below which are the key to the realization of interpersonal meaning.

10. why don't you

16. Sure enough, he

17. It was a great success, and when it was over,

22. Of course he

24. as if he

28. In fact, in order to show how simple it was,

In telling the story, the author tries to establish interaction with readers by telling them his judgment and comment on what was going on. For example, in 10.why don't you..., the scientist plays a joke by suggesting the driver give the lecture, which of course will arouse readers' interest in what happens next, this very well reveals another facet of Einstein, easy-to-approach and humorous, then by 16. Sure enough, he..., the author shows his strong confidence in the driver giving the lecture, and 17. It was a great success, confirms his assumption. Then comes the crisis, the so-called climax, in 22.Of course he..., by the use of *of course*, the writer implies that what happens next is something quite natural that the driver did not understand a thing about the question, through which he creates the suspense to draw readers' attention to continue their reading. 24.as if he surprises audience by bringing about an unexpected quick and smart response from the driver, which well manifests acuteness, wisdom and sense of humor on the part of the driver. Then by the use of 28.In fact, the driver draws audience's attention from him to Einstein by commenting that the question is not worth his answer for it is too simple, he would ask his driver to answer it! With this the story comes to a happy ending. Everybody feels relieved, amused and at the same time realizes that ordinary people like the driver can be wise, stoical and humorous just as the great scientist can also be as funny and mischievous.

IV. CONCLUSION

A functional approach to text analysis is meaning-oriented, its main purpose is to do the interpretation of the statistical figure about the distribution of related linguistic resources. As the discussion above reveals when telling the story, the writer paces the material, that is, arrange the events in such a way as to give primary emphasis to its most important constituents of participants, circumstance and process, which constitute the main framework of the story. The choice and ordering of Themes can create textual meaning and fulfill the social purpose. Putting all these Themes together, we may have the basic structural organization of the text, interpersonal Themes do play a critical role in creating interaction between writers and readers. The Thematic thread running through the Thematic content of component sentences is the time sequence, the method of development of this narration.

APPENDIX

At one time Einstein traveled all over the United States giving lectures. He traveled by car and soon became quite friendly with the driver. The driver listened carefully to Einstein's lecture, which the great scientist gave again and again. One day he told Einstein that he knew the lecture so well that he was sure he could give it himself. Einstein smiled and said, "why don't you give the lecture for me the next time?" The driver agreed. That evening two of them went along to

the lecture hall. Nobody there had seen Einstein before. As the driver took his place on the stage everybody clapped. Then he began the lecture. Sure enough, he didn't make a single mistake. It was a great success, and when it was over, people clapped and clapped. Then he started to leave, shaking hands with everybody, while Einstein followed quietly a few steps behind. Just before they got to the door, a man stopped them and asked the driver a very difficult question. The driver listened carefully. Of course he did not understand a thing, but he nodded his head as if he did. When the man stopped talking, the driver said that he thought the question was interesting but really quite simple. In fact, in order to show how simple it was, he would ask his driver to answer it!

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