

Theme Identification in English Clauses

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Abstract

This paper is centred on the notions of theme and rheme as a source for the organization of the clause as a message. It builds on Halliday (1994) who conceives theme as a clause initial element. The paper is an attempt to show how the theme is identified in the English clause. English speakers and writers use the first position in the clause to convey information to the listener showing what the message is about. In English, the first position in the clause is occupied by a textual meaning because it shows the development of the message. The importance of the notion of theme stems from the fact that the flow of information in a sentence from theme to rheme is important to convey the message effectively. Themes, as will be clarified, fall into three types: the textual theme, the interpersonal theme, and the ideational theme.

1. Introduction

The theme-rheme studies date back to 1844 when Henri Weil made the following observation :

"There is then a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms

the statement (l'enonciation), properly so called. This division is found in almost all what we say'' (Weil, 1944:29).

Since then, many linguists have started to investigate the message structure of the clause. Mathesius (1939) is the first who put forward the concepts of theme and rheme. According to him, theme is the part that comes first in a sentence and rheme remains the following part. In general, theme carries the old information while the rheme the new. Danes (1964: 225) defines theme as the element placed in the beginning of the sentence. His main contribution is represented by the concepts of the thematic progression in which he shows how theme becomes the rheme in the following clause and how theme is repeated in consequent clauses (see also Firbas, 1976:11). Generally, For the Praguean linguists, theme is the carrier of the lowest degree of the communicative dynamism. The communicative dynamism is the element that contributes least to the development of the discourse. Such an element is retrievable from context and carries the given information (Firbas, 1996:66). Theme-rheme classification refers to the organization of the clause as a message. Theme is what is spoken about, whereas rheme is what is said about the theme. Steedman (2000:649) argues that a theme is " what the participants have agreed to talk about while a rheme is the speaker's new contribution on the subject of the theme. See also Mathesius (1928), Danes (1970) and (1974), Firbas (1976) and (1992) among others. The following sentence, for instance:

1. Jack is a lawyer.

consists of the theme "Jack" and the rheme "is a lawyer" . In other words, " Jack" is a person about whom something is said, whereas, "is a lawyer" is what is said about "Jack".

As mentioned earlier, the theme-rheme classification was studied first by the Praguean linguists. According to Halliday (1985:53), language contains three major functions. These functions are briefly represented below:

1. The identical function

This function indicates a strategy to express our experience of the world.

2. The interpersonal function

This function refers to a strategy to establish and maintain social relationship.

3. The textual function

This function refers to a strategy to create "texture" and to make language operationally relevant.

As a linguistic unit, the clause can be analyzed according to the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings it expresses. Hence, the following clause:

2. Marry wrote a poem

can be analyzed ideationally, interpersonally, and textually.

Ideationally, it is analyzed as actor (i.e. Marry), process (i.e. wrote), and goal (i.e. a poem). The interpersonal analysis shows the role taken up by the speaker in the speech situation and the attitudes he adopts towards what he is saying . Hence, Interpersonally, it is analyzed as subject (i.e. Marry), predicator (i.e. wrote), and object (i.e. a poem). Textually, this clause is analyzed as theme "Marry" and rheme "wrote a poem" and the clause organization is viewed here as a message (Halliday, 1985:28-29).

2. Simple and Multiple Themes

A theme can be simple or complex. A simple theme is realized by a single element in the clause. This theme indicates an ideational meaning. Hence, the theme represents a process, a participant in the process, or a circumstance associated with that process. The simple theme is also called the topical theme (Halliday, 1985:54). The ideational theme can be recognized as the first element in the clause that expresses some kind of representational meaning (Martin et al. 1997:24). The following examples clarify this:

- | | |
|------------------------|--|
| 3. <u>I</u> | <u>manage a hotel.</u> (Collins, 2006) |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 4. <u>Next morning</u> | <u>I had three jobs.</u> (Collins, 2006) |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 5. <u>Remove</u> | <u>cocktail sticks.</u> (Collins, 2006) |
| Theme | Rheme |

The theme in sentence (3) is an agentive participant; the theme in sentence (4) is a circumstance; and in sentence (5), it is a process. A multiple theme, on the other hand, consists of, in addition to the ideational element, one more elements expressing interpersonal and/or textual meanings.

The interpersonal theme precedes the topical theme. Butt et al. (1995: 25) state that the interpersonal theme includes the finite element, the wh-element, the vocative and the adjunct:

(a). The finite element is realized by an auxiliary verb. When present in a clause, it signals that a response is expected, e.g.

6. Should they be doing that?

Theme Rheme

(b). A wh-element signals that the addressee should present an answer, e.g.

7. Why can't you come over tonight?

Theme Rheme

(c). A vocative is used to identify the addressee e.g.

8. Mr. Wolf, may we cross your golden waters?

Theme Rheme

(d). An adjunct is typically realized by an adverb. It shows the speaker's comment, attitude, or assessment towards the message, e.g.

9. Perhaps, she would be there now.

Theme Rheme

The interpersonal part of the theme is usually realized by one or more lexical items indicating the role the speaker takes in the speech situation and/or shows his judgment on what he says. The interpersonal theme in the clause is mostly realized by a set of lexical items which indicates the speaker's comment on the ideational content of the clause. Some of these items express the speaker's comment on the probability of what is being said, e.g.

10. Perhaps, that's why the car wouldn't start.

11. Obviously we are not going to get justice. (Collins,2006)

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Some other lexical items express the speaker's attitude towards what is being said, e.g.

12. Fortunately this is rarely the case. (Collins,2006)

3.Textual Theme

The textual theme almost always occurs at the first part of theme coming before the interpersonal theme. The textual themes are represented by :

(a). Structural conjunctions which link two clauses in a coordinating relation e.g. :

13. His uncle is dead, but his auntie still lives here.
(Collins,2006)

His uncle	is dead	but	his auntie	still lives here
Topical theme	Rheme	Textual structural theme	Topical theme	Rheme

(b). Relatives that relate a dependent clause to an independent clause

14. I don't understand what you want .

(c). Conjunctives that provide a cohesive link to a previous discourse e.g.

15. On the other hand, we could wait .

(d). Continuatives that indicate a relationship to a previous discourse e.g

16. Well, there was a little bit of bakelite.

(Halliday 1994, 55)

Mention should be made to the fact that in the unmarked sequence of these elements in the multiple theme, the textual theme comes first followed by the interpersonal theme which is in turn followed by the ideational theme (Halliday, 1985: 53) e.g.:

17. Oh , my dear boy , I ' m not fifty yet.

Oh ,	my dear boy	I	' m not fifty yet
Textual theme	Interpersonal theme	Ideational theme	Rheme

4.Theme and mood

The thematic organization of the clause in English heavily hinges on the system of mood since the realization of the different concepts in the mood system indicates the assignment of different elements to the initial element in the clause (Fries 1983: 119). Hence, in a declarative sentence, the subject is assigned to the initial position in the clause in the unmarked case, i.e. the subject normally functions as the unmarked theme in a declarative clauses. For more details, see Eggins (1994).

4.1 Theme in Declarative Clauses

The normal pattern of independent declarative clauses in English is that the first position is occupied by the subject. Accordingly, the subject is selected as the point of departure of the message and whatever follows the subject is supposed to be the rheme. The following example explains this:

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18. My uncle is a great man. He has always offered me help. He has given me the advice I need. He is very kind, too.

In the piece of discourse mentioned above, there are four declarative clauses. In each, the theme is realized by the subject of the clause represented by " My uncle", "He", " He " and " He " respectively. Theme is not to be equated with subject. The subject is more closely related to the surface feature of grammaticality, while theme is related to the concept of psychological subject (Bates, 1976: 50; Wang, 2008: 9). So, it is not always the case that declarative clauses are introduced by the subject. The object, complement or the adjunct may be fronted to function as the marked theme. A speaker or writer may front any element other than the subject in order to emphasize that element for contrastive purposes. In such a case, the fronted element functions as the marked theme which carries the focus of information. This is evident in the following two examples:

- 19. In Manchester, we do it this way.
- 20. On Thursday, I go to the hospital.
- 21. Merrily, we roll along.
- 22. In July, we go on holidays.

(Halliday, 1994:44)

The initial adverbials in the previous examples function as marked themes. Equally, an object or a complement is fronted in the following examples to function as the marked theme.

- 23. Cookies I love. (Halliday, 1994:44)
- 24. The nearest house was Owl's. (Martin et. al. 1997)

A predicate may also be fronted e.g.

- 25. Forget it I shall never (Halliday, 1994: 44). See also Baker et al., (2005 :10).

4.2 Theme in Interrogative Clauses

The typical function of an interrogative is to ask questions. From the speaker's point of view, the person asking needs to be told something (Halliday and Mathiensen, 2004:75). So, the interrogative mood is the mood of initiating questions. Interrogative clauses fall into two types: polar interrogatives and content interrogatives. A polar interrogative clause usually expresses a question about polarity. That is, a question of this kind is an immediate request for an answer, whether positive or negative. In English, such questions are formed by placing the operator before the subject in clause initial position. The fronting of the operator is mainly a thematic one. Here, the selection of the operator as the theme of the clause is quite normal because the operator is the element which summarizes what the clause is about (Halliday, 1985:47) e.g.

26. Are you interested in that?

Theme Rheme

27. Would you like a cup of tea?

Theme Rheme

28. Have you ever talked to her?

Theme Rheme

29. Shall we invite them all to the party?

Theme Rheme

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30. Did they try to say this?

Theme Rheme

In each of the above examples, the operator which expresses polarity is made the theme i.e. the point of departure for the message. However, the operator does not exhaust the theme of the clause and therefore the ideational element following it is also part of the theme of the clause and they both are referred to by Halliday (1985) as multiple theme.

In content interrogative clauses, the person asking is enquiring about the identity of an element in the ideational content of the clause. These content interrogative clauses are realized by placing an appropriate wh-word indicating the nature of the element in question initially in the clause. The wh-word in these questions functions as the theme of the clause. The wh-word shows what the question is about e.g.

31. What did you buy yesterday?

Theme Rheme

32. When will Mr. John learn how to drive ?

Theme Rheme

33. How can you convince him?

Theme Rheme

34. Why have you built that house?

Theme Rheme

4.3 Theme in Imperative clause

The imperative mood is the mood in which orders, commands, and requests are made. The imperative clause can have one of two moods. It can be with an explicit subject which is normally the second person pronoun 'you' as in the following:

- | | |
|----------------|----------------------|
| 35. <u>You</u> | <u>listen to me.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 36. <u>You</u> | <u>let her go.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 37. <u>You</u> | <u>keep silent.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 38. <u>You</u> | <u>go with them.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |

Hence, in the above examples, the theme is the second person pronoun "you" which functions as the subject of the clause and the rheme is realized by the rest of the sentence (Halliday,1994:47). The other type of the imperative clauses is that represented by clauses with no overt subjects. The theme in these sentences is realized by the verb initiating these sentences. Hence, they each can be analyzed into:

- | | |
|-----------------|------------------------------|
| 39. <u>Help</u> | <u>your brother.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |
| 40. <u>Save</u> | <u>the money I gave you.</u> |
| Theme | Rheme |

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41. Help your brother.

Theme Rheme

42. Help your brother.

Theme Rheme

4.4 Theme in Exclamative Clauses

Theme in exclamative clauses consists of a wh-element and either a nominal group or an adverbial group (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 78), e.g.

43. What a fool that person is! (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 78)

Theme	Rheme
44. <u>How sweet</u>	<u>she sounds!</u> (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 78)

Theme	Rheme
Halliday (1994:45) states that the exclamative clause is one sub-category of declarative clause which has a special thematic structure, namely the exclamative, e.g.	

45. What tremendously easy questions you ask!

Theme	Rheme
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Conclusions

The following points are concluded from this study:

1. A clause can be analyzed ideationally, interpersonally, and textually.
2. The only obligatory theme is the ideational one which may express a process, a participant in that process, or a circumstance associated with that process.
3. When the three types of theme are present in the clause, the textual theme should come first followed by the interpersonal theme which should in turn be followed by the ideational theme.

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4. The identification of theme is determined by the mood of the clause, whether the clause is declarative, interrogative or imperative.
5. In a declarative clause, the unmarked theme is realized by the subject.
6. In a declarative clause, the marked theme is realized by a fronted object, complement or adjunct.
7. The operator is the theme in a polar interrogative clause; while the wh-element is the theme in a content interrogative clause.
8. An imperative clause has the overt subject as the theme. When starting with the verb, that verb may be counted as the theme; or else the whole clause may be treated as the rheme.

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