

THEME, TRANSITIVITY AND COGNITIVE REPRESENTATION
IN SPANISH AND ENGLISH WRITTEN TEXTS

Anne M. McCabe, M^a Isabel Alonso Belmonte

Saint Louis U. Madrid Campus, Universidad Autónoma de Madrid

[annemccabe en ctv es](#) [isabel alonso en uam es](#)

“The structure of language reflects in some way the structure of experience, that is to say, the structure of the world, including [...] the perspective imposed on the world by the speaker”. Croft (1990:164)

Abstract

Our aim in this paper is to explore the notion of Theme from a cognitive perspective. We see the pressures which are brought to bear on Theme choice as manifold, as these pressures come in varying degrees from the three metafunctions: the interpersonal, the textual, and the experiential. It is this last component, with respect to the text producer’s cognitive perspective of reality, which is focused on here. To this end, using a discursual cognitive perspective, we expand the functional conception of Theme, and review other analysts’ (Ghadessy, 1993; Fries, 1995a; *inter alia*) results on Theme selection, as well as provide results from our own contrastive studies on Theme in Spanish and English. We conclude that, since Theme choice is linked to the contextual configuration of the text, the way in which text producers view the field of discourse, i.e. their cognitive representation of the field, is a contributing factor in motivation for Theme selection.

1. Introduction

Many linguists support the idea that language is closely interrelated with human cognition and perception. Starting from the assumption that language is based on human experience of the world and the way we perceive and conceptualize it (Langacker, 1987, 1991; Croft, 1990; Ungerer & Schmid, 1996; Tomasello, 1998; Cuenca and Hilferty, 1999; *inter alia*), in this paper we explore a cognitive approach to thematic selection, basing our exploration on the hypothesis that thematization of particular constituents throughout a text is in part due to the reflection of the speaker’s perception of reality. We will provide evidence of this from natural texts in the written mode in terms of:

1. their thematic selection: we will show that the Themes selected in each clause of the text unfold a textual strategy which may constitute an iconic reflection of the reality perceived by the speaker of the message. By text strategy (Enkvist, 1987) we refer to all recursive choices the text producer makes to attain a communicative goal: lexical choices, syntactic devices, focus-marking strategies, etc.
2. the experiential content encapsulated in each clause Theme: we will show that the build up of this content over a series of Themes may reflect a cultural perception of a given reality. According to Halliday (1994), the experiential function concerns the clause in “its guise as a way of representing patterns of experience” (ibid: 106), and it realizes these patterns through the system of transitivity. Transitivity is “the set of options relating to cognitive content, the linguistic representation of extralinguistic experience, whether of the phenomena of the external world or of feelings, thoughts and perceptions” (Halliday, 1967b: 199). Thus, the Themes of clauses will be examined in terms of the transitivity roles they embody.

We have selected texts written in both Spanish and English to explore whether a cognitive approach to the notion of Theme can contribute to fields like translation and contrastive rhetoric. Thus, we test here Kaplan’s claim that “the logic expressed through the organization of written text is culture-specific; that is, it posits that speakers of two different languages will organize the same reality in different ways” (1995: 21). Given that the Theme/Rheme structure is the “basic form of the organization the clause as message” (Halliday, 1985: 53), it would seem that differences would occur in Theme choices across texts written in Spanish and in English.

The notion that the organization of reality is reflected to some extent in a textual choice, such as Theme, comes from the principle of iconicity, an important concept in this paper. According to Larsen, “[i]conicity [...] is a pervasive – though hidden – motivating force in the internal structure of language itself” (Larsen, 1993: 111). The principle of iconicity has as its source the philosopher C.S. Peirce’s notion of “icon”, a term which he used to refer to similarities between the structure of language and the structure of the world (Peirce, 1958).

As a clarification, when we use the term “cognitive”, we are not referring to the psychological processes which take place in the mind of the speaker, but to the text as, in some sense, a mirror of the speaker’s perception of reality. We do not study psychological processes here, as, for example, van Dijk & Kintsch (1983) and Vande Kopple (1986) do in analyzing cognitive processes which take place during reading with respect to textual organization. Instead, we focus on the linguistic outcome of cognitive processes, not on the cognitive processes themselves.

This paper is structured as follows: in section 2 we present a review of the relevant literature on the Theme-Rheme structure in English from a functional perspective and add a cognitive slant to its conception. Section 3 offers evidence for iconic experiential representation through thematization strategies, while section 4 looks at the transitivity functions of the Themes of clauses in order to explore how history textbook writers view the field of discourse, and how this view is reflected in Theme choice. Section 5 offers some conclusions based on the previous sections.

2. Towards a cognitive understanding of the notion of Theme

Formal categories such as *Theme*, *Topic*, *Grammatical Subject* and *Given (recoverable) information* often come together in initial position of the clause in SVO languages. However, there is a great deal of confusion among all these terms in literature: it is very common to read research articles on these linguistic phenomena in which terminology is used in differing ways. Let us try then to clarify the notion of Theme as it is used here through a review of some recent relevant functional literature.

First of all, Topic is a non-structural discourse category which describes what the text is about (Brown and Yule, 1983; van Oosten, 1986). Given (recoverable) information is that information which can be predicted or which belongs to that knowledge shared by both the speaker and the listener, whereas New information is that information contextually non-retrievable which says something about the Given (Prince, 1981). Finally, Theme is considered to be a structural category realized by clause initial position in English (Halliday, 1994; Downing, 1991).

The traditional sentential characterization of Theme as the starting point of the clause (Halliday 1967a, 1967b, 1970, 1994) or as known information (Prague School) has been extended by other researchers working within the systemic-functional framework. For example, Fries (1981/1983, 1992, 1994, 1995a, 1995b), Martin (1992, 1995) and Berry (1996), among others, have pointed out that Theme is not only a clause category, but fulfills other roles in the structuring and the development of discourse. For Brown and Yule (1983:133), Theme is not only the starting point of the message, but it also has a role of connecting to what has been already said. And its discourse function is to orient “the listener/reader to the message that is about to be perceived and provide a framework for the interpretation of that message” (Fries, 1995^a: 318).

Other researchers like Vasconcellos (1992) or López García (1994) have approached the notion of Theme from a more cognitive perspective since they establish a link between language and the speaker’s perception of reality. Indeed, for Vasconcellos (1992), the function of Theme is “to signal the relationship between the thought in the speaker's mind and its expression in discourse” (*ibid*: 147). She bases her conception of Theme on work done by Travnicek (1962), who reached the conclusion that the principle of the Theme flows from the relationship between the speaker's object of thought and its expression in text. This same conception is finds echo in Bloor and Bloor when they state that Theme in English is *the idea represented by the constituent at the starting of the clause* (1995:72).

This connection between the structure of language and the structure of the world, or the perspective imposed on the world by the speaker/writer, has been supported by many scholars. For Enkvist, “in natural order, then, text and discourse (*sermo*) have the same arrangement as things in the universe of discourse (*ordo rerum*)” (1981: 98). More specifically, in several of his articles (1981, 1984, 1987) he posits three textual principles which govern the constituent order in the clause. The first one is based on the Given information/New Information continuum; the second is called *textual iconicism* by Enkvist (1984: 56) and its main motivation is stylistic. Finally, the last one is *experiential iconicism* (*ibid*), through which the text becomes a portrait of our experience of the world (1987:207). For López García, who conceives his *Gramática del Español, I. La oración compuesta* from a psychologist/gestaltic perspective, “toda expresión lingüística es una forma peculiar de verbalizar el mundo” (*ibid*: 7). Givón explains that this isomorphism between language and reality has a logical motivation “A coded experience is easier to store, retrieve and *communicate* if the code is maximally isomorphic to the experience” (Givón, 1985:189, emphasis original).

Evidence for this isomorphism can be gleaned from studies on Theme. For example, Ghadessy (1993) concludes that the most common points of departure in sports commentary are animate participants of material clauses, of processes such as “kick, shoot, head, score, boot, drag, shield, etc.” (*ibid*: 9). The perception of the sporting event which commentators pass on to their readers, then, is one of active participants, followed by their movements. He also points out that time circumstances are frequently thematized, while spatial ones are not. This is because, Ghadessy points out, the readers are “familiar with the space and its dimensions in the form of *left, right, centre, back, etc.*” (*ibid*: 14). Thus, the animate figures and notions of temporal sequence are the objective of the commentary, and the playing field can be thought of as a schema which the readers have as readily available. This can be contrasted with Fries’ (1983) examples of descriptions of apartments, in which spatial locations or changes in relative position with respect to the physical space, are thematized. Here, the focus of the texts is on how a person might move through the apartment, and the writers provide conceptual maps from which the reader can visually reconstruct the physical reality.

According to López García, the notions of Theme and Rheme correspond to a specific way of verbalizing the speaker’s perception of the world in figure and ground, i.e. the gestalt duality. Enkvist (1984, 1987) claims that the thematic selection in a text reflects the speaker’s perception of reality since the principle of *experiential iconicism*, among other principles, governs the order of constituents in the clause which in turn influences the thematic selection of the clauses forming a text. Even for Halliday, who approaches language from a social perspective, moving from thematic Given to a rhematic New allows a “movement in time” which “construes iconically the flow of information” (Halliday, 1993: 92). Therefore, we can conclude that there are grounds to support the notion that thematic selection has a cognitive motivation, at least in part, in that Theme selection allows us a reflection of the speaker’s perception of reality.

Thus, the Theme of the clause, which formally is the initial element of the clause, functionally combines the expression of the speaker's perception of reality and the concerns of the speaker to communicate that perception of reality to the listener. It is, thus, both cognitive, in the sense that it refers to the world of experience, and communicative, in the sense that it has a discursive role. This combined function of Theme goes some way in explaining some of the problems involved with pinning down the function of Theme, and separates it from notions of givenness and aboutness.

3. Thematization Strategies

As we have seen in section 2 above, the traditional sentential characterization of Theme has been extended and completed by a discourse-oriented one over the last ten years. During this time, many studies in the English language have shown that there are patterns of thematic selection above the sentence level which correlate with the structure of a text or with the specific genre to which a text belongs.¹ At the same time, a line of contrastive research on thematic choices and modes of thematization employed by different languages has developed.² Furthermore, some scholars have shown that Theme can act for the reader as a signpost of a specific text structuring strategy, which the writer chooses in order to organize his/her text according to the discourse type to which it belongs (Lavid, 1994; Alonso, 1997; *inter alia*). Unfortunately, the results obtained in these studies are very different, vary according to the genre which is explored – it is much easier to detect a Theme pattern in a recipe than in a newspaper editorial -, and do not demonstrate the existence of a one-to-one correspondence between a specific thematization strategy and a single genre. On the contrary, it is very common to find several modes of thematization interacting throughout a text and the same mode of thematization occurring in different text types. In Loftipour-Saedi & Rezai-Tajani's words (1996), "while a specific mode of thematization may be employed for the purpose of getting the reader's attention in an advertising text, the same strategy may be employed for quite a different purpose in a literary text, such as maximizing the amount of time taken to process the text in order to add to the imaginative nature of the meaning to be negotiated in such texts" (p. 243).

According to the most recent research, these variations in the special employment of one or several thematization strategies both within and across genres are cognitively and communicatively motivated: the writer's will to transmit a specific perception of reality together with contextual/extralinguistic factors (i.e. the audience, the social setting, the specific subject matter of the text, the communicative purpose, etc.) are determinant in the selection of thematic options in each text.

¹ Berry (1987), for example, compared the use of thematized locatives in a guidebook, a travel brochure, a transcript of a coffee party and a transcript of a committee meeting; Martin (1986, 1989) focused on the experiential content of the clause Themes of hortatory and analytical exposition; Francis (1989, 1990) compared Theme selection in news reports, editorials and letters of complaint; Bäcklund (1991) analyzed Theme choices in telephone conversations taken from the London Lund corpus; Xiao (1991) compared thematic choices in recipes and fables; and Nie Long (1991) analysed the relationship between thematic selections, processes types and genre in guidebooks and a story; Wang Ling (1992) studied Theme in six plays by Sam Shepard; Ghadessy (1993) studied on the grammatical and lexicosemantic properties of Themes in a number of written sports commentaries, Fries (1995a) and Ghadessy (1995) summarize many of the above studies and compare the results with thematic studies of their own; Whittaker (1995) compares thematic selection in economics and linguistics articles; *inter alia*.

² Yarmohammadi and Amal-Saleh (1991) studied Theme-Rheme organization, Theme relationships, categories, origins and dependency or sequencing bonds in five fields of social science in English and Persian. Aziz (1988) is a study of thematic organization in a narrative paragraph from a novel written in Arabic, the results of which he compares to other studies of thematic organization in English and in French. Newsham (1977, in James, 1980) analyzes thematic patterning in paragraphs selected at random from English and French university level textbooks from different disciplines. Mauranen (1993) analyzes Theme and thematic patterns in Finnish and English texts. As regards English-Spanish contrastive studies, Alonso (1997) analyzed Theme selection in five different text types in Spanish and contrasted it with a similar study in English (Lavid, 1994); Alonso and McCabe (1998) studied thematic choices in English argumentative texts written by Spanish-native students; McCabe (1999) studied compared Theme choices in history text books in English and in Spanish.

Consider the following example:

I) **CHESTER PAST**

(1) *Chester's history* stretches over 2000 years (2) *and all the dramatic events that shaped the destiny of Britain* are etched immortally into the vary fabric of its heritage.

(3) *In 79 AD*, the Roman Empire built Fortress Deva as a frontier outpost to suppress Welsh tribes.

(4) *Three centuries later*, the legions were recalled to protect Rome. (5) *Britain* plunged into the Dark Ages and (6) *(it)* was plundered by invaders from across the North Sea. (7) *Before long*, Vikings landed on the shores of Chester...

(8) *In the 10th century*, Aethelfaeda, daughter of King Alfred the Great, established Chester as a fortified town, strengthening and extending the City Walls to defend the citizens against Viking hordes...

(9) *In 1066*, William of Normandy defeated the English King Harold at the Battle of Hastings and the Norman conquest began. (10) *His armies* crushed all oppositions (11) *and Cheshire* was laid waste. (12) *Hugh Lupus*, nephew of William the Conqueror, distinguished himself in this cruel campaign (13) *and (he)* was rewarded with the earldom of Chester.

(14) *He* built the formidable Chester Castle, a base for punitive expeditions against rebellious Welsh tribes...

(15) *During the Middle Ages*, Chester became the most important port in NW England. (16) *The City's merchants* exported candles, salt and cheese and trade flourished. (...)

(City of Chester. Official Mini Guide)

(I) is an example of a narrative text in which the writer alternates two thematization strategies depending on the communicative factors arising at a particular moment: a global temporal strategy (marked by the use of temporal Themes and signaled in the text by italics and underlining) is used when the writers wants to focus on the changes in time occurring in the text, and a more local topical strategy (marked by the use of topical Themes and signaled in the text only by italics), subordinated to the global one, is utilized when the writer wants to focus on the participant-topic of the text, bringing the temporal elements to a secondary position. By thematizing time elements in narrative texts, the reader understands the initial element of the clause as a temporal framework which provides the setting for the ensuing information (Downing, 1991:132). Besides, by using a temporal strategy of thematization, the writer makes the text maximally isomorphic to experience since narration deals with the cognitive process of perception in time (Werlich, 1976), which makes the full comprehension of the information about the event narrated much easier.

We believe these cognitive and communicative motivations which determine the presence of specific thematization strategies are not culturally specific. Consider the following descriptive text in English in which the writer mainly unfolds a spatial mode of thematization. This textual strategy is linguistically realized by clause-initial locatives in English and describes a spatial itinerary which takes the reader from one place to the other:

(II) **TOURING FROM CARDIFF**

(...) (1) *Here* we shall concentrate on the fascinating variety of attractions within a hour' s drive of Cardiff -- too numerous to list in full so we offer you a sample:

(2) *Immediately to the NORTH of Cardiff* lie the industrial valleys of South Wales made famous throughout the world by films such as "How Green was my valley". (3) *Here* small working communities lie hemmed in by green hills. (4) *Here* the archeology of the industrial revolution abounds in vivid contrast to the breath-taking natural beauty you enjoy when negotiating the steep winding roads that go "over the top" from one valley to the next, such as the road over the Rhigos, from Maerdy to Aberdare. (5) *Beyond the valleys* lie the mountains of the Brecon Beacons National Park. (6) *Here* the sheep predominate. (7) Man-made lakes that supply water to the population of South East Wales lie between the mountains. (8) Stopping in the car park at Storey Arms one can relax and enjoy the beautiful surroundings or, more energetically, follow the footpath to the top of 2,907 ft high Penylan. (9) Visit the mountain centre at Libanus or the interpretive centre in the Garwnant Forest, for an insight into the wildlife of the area.

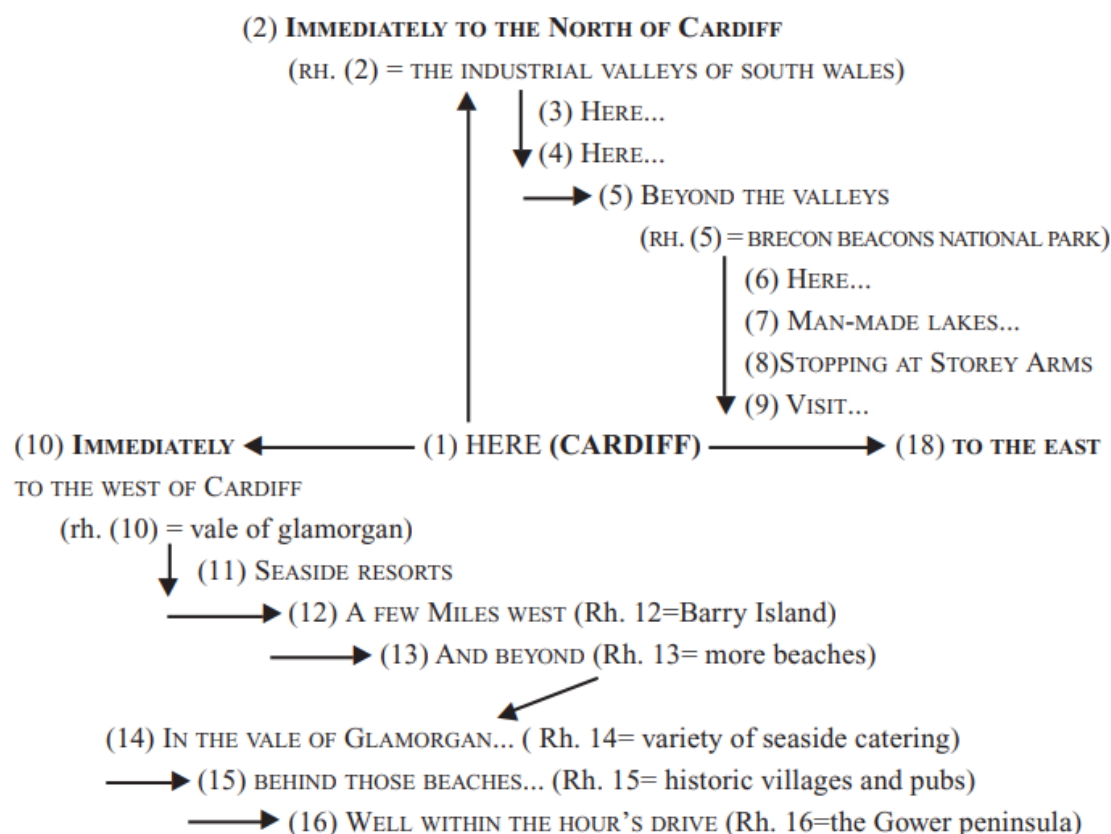
(10) *Immediately to the WEST of Cardiff* lies the Vale of Glamorgan with its villages, leafy lanes, farmland and heritage coastline. (11) *Seaside resorts* start just beyond the city boundary with the Edwardian-style resort of Penarth, complete with pebble beach and pier. (12) *A few miles west* lies the livelier type of resort, Barry Island, with all the joys of the pleasure park and a wide, sandy beach. (13) *And beyond* lie more beaches-Fontygary, Llantwit Major, Southerndown, Ogmore. (14) *In the Vale of Glamorgan* you will find a variety of seaside catering for most tastes. (15) *Behind those beaches* lie unspoilt country with historic villages and delightful pubs. (16) *Well within the hour's drive* lies Porthcawl another lively resort complete with funfair. (17) *Just about that hour's drive away to the west* lie some of Britain's loveliest coastline, the Gower Peninsula, with its wide sandy beaches and great headlands.

(18) *To the EAST* we have the beautiful wooded Wye Valley, with the remains of a famous abbey on the banks of the river at Tintern, the Roman remains of Caerleon, Caerwent, Raglan Castle, Monmouth and the Forest of Dean.

(The Cardiff Guide, Cardiff City Council)

As we can see, every time that the writer moves from one place to another, a spatial Theme is selected (signaled in the text by italics and underlining). The succession of spatial Themes is the linguistic realization of a global spatial strategy chosen by the writer to guide the reader throughout the text in terms of the physical reality around Cardiff, as if the reader himself were moving through the country. We can clearly see the itinerary strategy unfolded by the writer in Figure 1:

Figure 1: Mapping of the Cardiff Text



The same temporal strategy of thematization is unfolded in the following Spanish text:

(III) HUESCA

(1) *La Catedral* es un valioso templo gótico construido entre los siglos XIII y XV, que, a pesar de ser perfectamente representativo de los de su estilo, cuenta con un elemento autóctono en el alero que protege la

portada. (2) *En el interior* conviene contemplar detalladamente el retablo mayor, una imponente talla de alabastro realizada en el primer tercio del XVI por Damián Forment, quien tuvo que aceptar un tardío marco gótico para sus composiciones, ya plenamente renacentistas.

(3) *Frente a la Catedral* se alza el Ayuntamiento, un sobrio palacio de los siglos XVI y XVII, que muestra en la parte superior de su fachada una galería protegida por un gran alero, y en cuyo interior puede observarse el monumental cuadro de Casado del Alisal sobre la Campana de Huesca.

(4) *El alero típico del Ayuntamiento* volverá a aparecer ante el viajero en muchos otros edificios rurales y urbanos de Aragón.

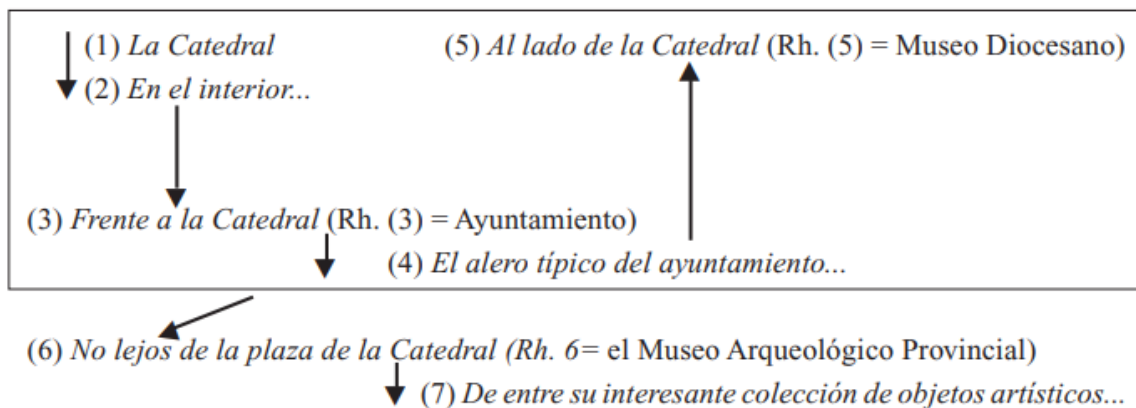
(5) *Al lado de la Catedral* se encuentra el Museo Diocesano, con el notable ejemplar de pintura románica de San Fructuoso, de Bierge y el retablo de Montearagón, de Gil de Morlanes, introductor del arte renacentista en Aragón.

(6) *No lejos de la plaza de la Catedral* se encuentra el Museo Arqueológico Provincial, una de cuyas partes fue palacio de los Reyes de Aragón, y allí se conserva una lóbrega mazmorra, donde se cuenta tuvo lugar la leyenda de la Campana de Huesca. (7) *De entre su interesante colección de objetos artísticos* destacan las tablas góticas del maestro de Sigena.

(Aragón, Cataluña y la Comunidad Valenciana. Itinerarios por España, p. 4, TURESPAÑA, 1992.)

Figure 2: Mapping of the *Huesca* Text

PLAZA DE LA CATEDRAL DE HUESCA



Therefore, we can see that the same global spatial strategy of thematization is chosen by writers both in Spanish and English when dealing with place relations in descriptive texts and that this strategy is generally marked by the selection of locative Themes every time there is a change from one place to another. By thematizing locatives every time there is a change in the spatial scope, the writer creates the adequate spatial framework to locate the reader before sending him all the information about that particular place (Downing, 1991). Besides, by using the spatial strategy of thematization, the writer makes the text mimetic of experience (Enkvist, 1981:101) and in doing so mirrors physical movement around a given area, which makes the full comprehension of the text much easier for the reader.

Obviously, the isomorphism between language and the reality that we want to transmit is not always so evident. A text is the final product of competing motivations which sometimes destroy the parallelism between the linguistic structure and external structure in the name of the economy principle, personal interest, focus, maintenance of perspective, climax creation, etc (Croft, 1990; Larsen, 1993). At other times, however, this cognitive motivation survives for communicative reasons, that is, to guide the reader through the text by means of strategies of thematization.

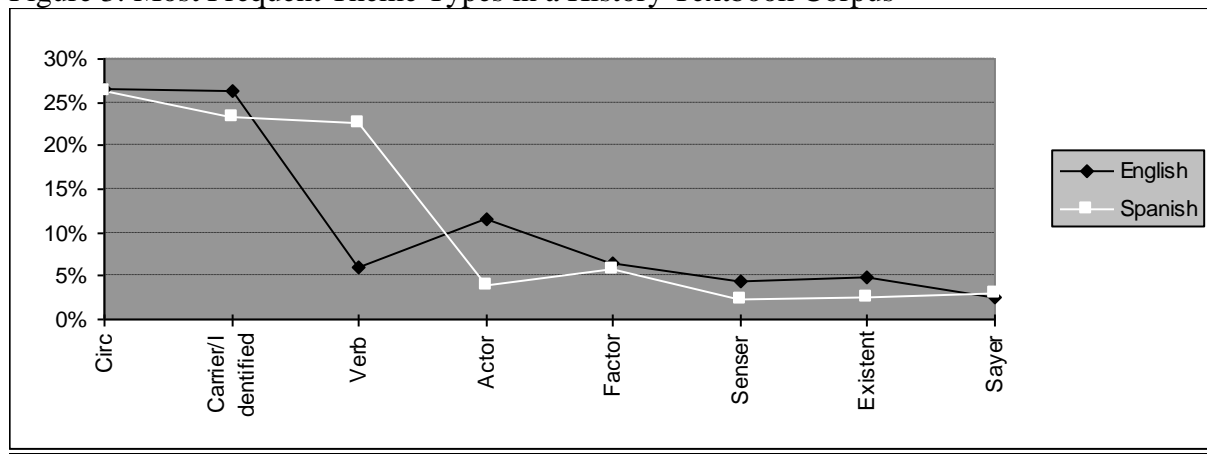
Nevertheless, not all texts unfold a clear overall strategy of thematization which guides the reader in the same way as travel brochures or recipes. There are other text types, such as editorials, scientific articles, or textbooks, in which the organization of ideas is much more complex, and thus it is difficult to detect clear global strategies of thematization which mirror the writer's perception of reality in the way we have seen in this section. This does not mean that Theme selection in these texts fails to provide us with a reflection of the view of the world of the writer, as will be seen in the next section.

4. Theme and Transitivity Roles

This section shows the influence on thematic selection of how a certain field of discourse is viewed. It draws on research carried out by McCabe (1999), which involved a corpus of history textbooks, written for upper-secondary/tertiary studies, in both Spanish and English. Twenty chapters or sections for a range of texts used in Spanish and American schools and universities were chosen, ten from each language. The clauses of each of the chapters were analyzed for the type of process represented (material, mental, existential, verbal, behavioral, or relational). Then, each ideational Theme was labeled in terms of the corresponding participant function (Actor, Goal, etc.), or circumstantial function, in cases where the Theme had the form of a minor clause, a dependent clause, a prepositional phrase, or any other grammatical construction which could represent a circumstance. Finally, the percentage of each of the types of participants and circumstances was calculated with reference to the total number of Themes for each of the corpora.

The graph below shows the most frequent Theme types in terms of their role in the transitivity of the clause:

Figure 3: Most Frequent Theme Types in a History Textbook Corpus



In both languages, circumstantial elements appeared with equal frequency; in addition, although not reflected in the graph, they also played a similar role in terms of experiential representation. For example, in both languages, around 12% of the clauses have as the point of departure a circumstantial element of temporal or spatial location/extent, temporal being the most frequent thematized circumstance in both corpora. Furthermore, these temporal references were sometimes used as a strategy of thematization, in a similar fashion as example I in the previous section, for a stretch of text: however, more often they occur as an isolated temporal reference: they can occur as paragraph initial or they might not; they occur before new Themes, or in the middle of thematic chains. Therefore, it is felt here that they are thought of by writers as simply “free”, in that they are readily available to readers of history. This finding in itself seems to lend some support to the notion that thematic selection is influenced by the contextual variable of field, as history revolves around the occurrence of events in time.

Following different circumstantial elements as the most common Theme type across both corpora were participants in relational processes, Carriers and Identifieds. This prevalence of relational process participants shows the descriptive and analytical nature of the textbooks in both corpora. Following these relational participants in popularity in the Spanish corpus were verbs as Themes; the difference displayed in the graph with the English corpus can be explained by a grammatical difference between the two languages given that in declarative clauses in English subject elision is not allowed except for in coordinated clauses having the same subject. In Spanish, subject elision is allowed in more contexts, and indeed is required in some cases. It goes beyond the scope of this paper to comment on this grammatical difference, in terms of whether the allowance of thematic verbs in Spanish has come about in the language for a functional reason related to thematic concerns; evidence for this would call for a diachronic analysis of the language. This underlying grammatical difference does bring about a difference across the two corpora in terms of the overall thematic configuration of the texts, and this supports to some extent Kaplan’s hypothesis as stated in the Introduction of this paper. However, the rest of the graph shows great similarity across the two corpora, except with respect to Actors as Theme.

Indeed, what is of greater interest here in this synchronic study is the difference reflected in the graph of thematized participants from material clauses, i.e. historical Actors that do something. This difference cannot be explained away by subject elision in Spanish, as overall in the English corpus there is almost 10% greater frequency of material processes than in the Spanish corpus. Simply put, in the English texts there is a greater relating of events, and these events are carried out by individuals. This is illustrated clearly in two chapters on 19th century European emigration, one in English and one in Spanish. The English text uses 22.96% of its Themes for Actors, while the Spanish text uses only 4.7% of its Theme slots for the same purpose. It is the case that an overwhelming percentage of the thematized Actors in both texts represent groups of immigrants, and the Rhemes of the clauses develop their actions in terms of their movements from one country to another. However, in the Spanish text, these thematized Actors do not appear until the end of the chapter; the rest of the chapter analyzes the causes of immigration, thus leaving for the end of the chapter the effect, i.e. the actual emigration. The English text, on the other hand, describes emigration throughout the whole chapter, as can be seen from the following sampling of clauses with Actors as Theme:

(IV) History Text in English

(2) *millions of people* pulled up stakes

(12) *These migrants* went primarily to the "areas of European settlement" - North and South America, Australia, New Zealand, and Siberia - ...

(21) Thus *millions of country folk* went abroad as well as to nearby cities in search of work and economic opportunity.

(36) *More and more Italians* left the country right up to 1914, reflecting severe problems in Italian villages and relatively slow industrial growth.

(58) *Jews from eastern Europe and peasants from Ireland* migrated to Great Britain,

(60) and *Latin peoples from Spain, Portugal, and Italy* entered France.

(64) *One in two migrants to Argentina and probably one in three to the United States* eventually returned to their native land.

(66) *Seven out of eight people who migrated from the Balkans to the United States in the late nineteenth century* returned to their countries.

(98) *Other Italians* migrated to other European countries.

(102) *Many people from a given province or village* settled together in rural enclaves or tightly knit urban neighborhoods thousands of miles away.

(McKay, J. P., B. D. Hill & J. Buckler. *A History of Western Society: Volume C, From the Revolutionary Era to the Present. Chapter 26 The West And The World.* Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1995.)

Here, the writers construe the historical events in terms of movement: the Actors are the points of departure, and the verbs of movement provide a transition to the spatial locations where the Actors end up. There is also analysis of the phenomenon of migration in this chapter, as the following excerpt shows:

(23) *Before looking at the people who migrated*, let us consider three facts.

When we look at those "three facts", an interesting development emerges:

(24) First, *the number of men and women who left Europe* increased rapidly before World War One.

(27) Second, *different countries* had very different patterns of movement.

(38) Third, *although the United States absorbed the largest number of European migrants*, less than half of all migrants went to the United States.

The facts considered are tendencies which further describe the migration, the phenomenon itself. This text begins with the events, and from the events it looks for tendencies, causes, etc. The text is always centered on the movement of the emigrants; thus it is logical that the emigrants involved in the movement are so frequently thematized as Actors. On the other hand, the Spanish text describes the field of demographics, and dedicates a

good part of the chapter to a description of the population increase, and to famine, war, epidemics, and so on, and then analyzes the role that these phenomena played in the great migration of the 19th century:

(V) History Text in Spanish

(9) *las migraciones contemporáneas* son el resultado tanto de la revolución del transporte como del momento de la población.

(10) Incluso *en la política* aparecerán fenómenos de masas en la base de ideologías como el fascismo.

(11) *Revolución industrial, colonialismo, y descolonización, sociedad de masas, revolución de los transportes*, procesos todos cardinales en la historia contemporánea, aparecen ligados al incremento demográfico.

(Fernández, A. *La Historia del Mundo Contemporáneo. Capítulo 1: De las Sociedades Agrarias a las Sociedades Industriales*. Barcelona: Vicens-Vives, S.A., 1986.)

Here, the points of departure are “higher” events than the phenomenon of migration itself. And these higher order phenomena are then described in the Rhemes of the clauses. Thus, through this analysis of the transitivity role which the different clause Themes play in the texts, we see that the Spanish text moves from the causes of migration to the effects, while the English text moves from the effects to the causes. This may correlate in part to a different philosophy of history. Halldén (1997) identifies two types of explanation in history writing: structural and causal. Structural explanations explain events by describing their function in a system, while causal explanations explain the event through other events. If the texts are looked at through the Actors used as Theme, the Spanish text seems to take a system of demographics and explain the related events through their function in that system. The English text seems to explain the movements by then looking at other larger events. Halldén goes on to state that “these two forms of explanation pertain to different historical methods. Causal explanations can be related to a narrative form of history, whereas structural explanations are more concerned with the method of colligation” (Halldén, 1997: 205). Carretero, et al (1997: 245-246) draw support from von Wright (1971) to underscore the notion that “causal explanations in history are intentional and personalized, given that individual agents play a prominent role in the genesis of historical events”. Leinhardt (1997: 224) explains the nature of events in history, and shows their relationship to narrative:

Events are the paradigmatic, short, narrative episodes about wars, treaties, and people that are characteristic of history. Events include migrations, revolutions, changes of people and offices; the connections are causal. Events have actors, purposes, motives, consequences and are narrative in flavor.

Colligatory expressions, on the other hand, are higher order concepts, such as “the Industrial Revolution”, which bring together a series of events. Thus, the actions of the individual are the focus of a causal or narrative conception of history, while impersonal structures are the focus of a structural conception of history.

Through the thematic analysis, then, the different ways of constructing historical reality which the two different cultures may have can be seen, although this situation is not that straightforward: not all of the texts in English, on the one hand, and in Spanish, on the other, demonstrate this tendency – indeed, there is a pair of texts in which the situation is the other way around. At any rate, this serves to reinforce the notion that the thematic selection in terms of transitivity role is to some extent a measure of the way in which historians view History, that is, how they construe History depending on their philosophy of History, which influences their way of viewing the reality of historical events.

5. Conclusion

Thus, we have seen through this article that Theme selection is indeed influenced by the way in which a speaker perceives reality, and by the way in which the speaker attempts to transmit that cognitive perception to readers. For example, in guidebooks, writers provide a spatial orientation to their readers, which provide a cognitive map of the way in which the writer visualizes the physical territory described. The movement from one physical location to another is encoded in the Themes of the clauses, and the description of the different locations is

encoded in the Rhemes, once the reader has been spatially located according to the map in the writer's mind. This experiential iconicism, or parallel movement between the perceived reality and the organization of textual Themes, also takes place with temporal references, as one strategy writers use to orient their readers to their messages is to take as the point of departure one point in time after another, in a chronological fashion. Also, we have seen that by selecting certain transitivity roles as Theme, writers can make manifest their conception of a field of discourse.

This is not to say that we believe that language is an exact replica of nature. However, the writer's perception of reality is always present as a motivating factor in text order, which is often overcome by other discourse constraints. At any rate, to our knowledge, thematic selection has not been explored from the notion of cognitive motivation in previous research. And, in fact, this search for a cognitive motivation for Theme selection is going beyond Halliday's conception of the Theme/Rheme. However, we feel that this approach adds to the literature on Theme. Metaphorical definitions for Theme abound in the literature: Halliday's (1970: 164) conception of Theme as "the peg on which the message is hung", Davies' (1997) as the initiator of the "semantic journey" of the clause, and Martin's, "an orientation, a perspective, a point of view, a perch, a purchase" (Martin, 1992: 489). These "slippery" definitions may be necessary in that Theme performs many different functions, depending on the point in text where it occurs. Thus, Theme choice is governed by several different factors: textual concerns (i.e., text continuity and textual iconicism), interpersonal concerns (e.g. informational vs. interactional purpose), grammatical constraints, and, as we have seen in this paper, experiential iconicism, or a desire to present the order of constituents of the clause in a way which reflects the text producer's perception of reality.

With respect to Kaplan's claim (see Introduction) that different cultures organize reality, and thus text, in different ways, the results from the texts used as illustrations in this paper provide evidence that this is not always the case, at least as far as Theme selection is concerned. In any given text, text producers keep in mind their audience, purpose, and the context for which the text is written. These may be similar across cultures, as we have seen with the guidebooks in section 3, and to some extent with the history textbooks in section 4. And these similarities in contextual configuration seem to lead to similarities in textual choices with respect to the Theme/Rheme configuration. However, there may be differences, for example, in how the field is viewed and perhaps in relationships between writers and readers, which may bring about variation in Theme selection. Thus, "[t]hat there is a relationship between a code and the culture that engenders it is beyond question; but it is an extremely complex and abstract one" (Halliday, 1994: xxxi).

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Thomas Bloor and to Martin Davies for their comments on a draft of this article. Their suggestions provided rich ground for thought, which led to changes that we feel have improved the quality of the paper. Any infelicities, of course, remain totally our own.

References

- Alonso, Isabel. "Estrategias textuales y su realización temática en español: un estudio de corpus", *Revista Española de Lingüística Aplicada, (RESLA)* n° 12 (1997): 55-74.
- Alonso, Isabel and Anne McCabe. "Theme-Rheme patterns in L2 writing", *Didáctica (Lengua y Literatura)*, n° 10, Facultad de Educación, Universidad Complutense de Madrid (1998): 13-31.
- Aziz, Yowell Y. "Theme-Rheme Organization and Paragraph Structure in Standard Arabic". *WORD* 39.2 (1988): 117-128.
- Bäcklund, Ingegerd. "Theme in English Telephone Conversation". *Language Sciences*, 14.4 (1992): 545-564.
- Berry, Margaret. "What is Theme? -- A(nother) Personal View". In M. Berry, C. Butler, R. Fawcett & G. Huang (Eds.) *Meaning and Form: Systemic Functional Interpretations*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Company: 1-64.

- Berry, Margaret. (1987) "The functions of place names". *Leeds Studies in English, New Series XVIII: Studies in honour of Kenneth Cameron*, Eds. T. Turville-Petre and M. Gelling. Leeds: School of English, University of Leeds, 1996. 71-88.
- Thomas Bloor and Meriel Bloor. *The Functional Analysis of English*. Arnold, 1995.
- Brown, Gillian and George Yule *Discourse Analysis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.
- Carretero, Mario, Asunción López-Mani6n & Liliana Jacott. "Explaining Historical Events". *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27.3 (1997): 245-253.
- Croft, William. (1990) *Typology and Universals*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Cuenca, Mar6a Josep and Joseph Hilferty. *Introducci6n a la lingüística cognitiva*. Barcelona: Ariel, 1999.
- Davies, Martin (1997) "Cohesion in Literary Texts". Paper given at Saint Louis University, Madrid, March 3, 1997. A shorter version of this paper entitled "Cohesion in three poems" is published in *Patterns in Discourse and Text. Ensayos de análisis del discurso en lengua inglesa*. Eds. A. Downing, A.J. Moya Guijarro and J.I. Albentosa Hernández. Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 1998, 177-205.
- Downing, Angela. "An alternative approach to Theme: A systemic-functional perspective." *Word*, 42.2 (1991): 119-143.
- Enkvist, Nils Erik. "Text strategies: single, dual, multiple". *Language Topics: Essays in honour of Michael Halliday*. Volume II. Eds. In R. Steele & T. Threadgold. Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1987. 203-211.
- Enkvist, Nils Erik. "Contrastive linguistics and text linguistics". *Contrastive Linguistics: Prospects and Problems*. Ed. J. Fisiak. Mouton de Gruyter, 1984. 45-67.
- Enkvist, Nils Erik. "Experiential iconism in text strategy." *Text* 1.1 (1981): 77-111.
- Francis, Gill. "Thematic Selection and Distribution in Written Discourse". *Word*, 40, 1.2 (1989): 201-222.
- Francis, Gill. "Theme in the Daily Press". *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics*, 4 (1990): 51-87.
- Fries, Peter H. "Themes, Methods of Development, and Texts". *On Subject and Theme*. Eds. R. Hasan & P.H. Fries. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1995a. 317-359.
- Fries, Peter H. "A Personal View of Theme". *Thematic Development in English Texts*. Ed. M. Ghadessy. London and New York, Pinter, 1995b. 129-146.
- Fries, Peter H. "On Theme, Rheme and discourse goals". *Advances in Written Text Analysis*. Ed. M. Coulthard. London: Routledge, 1994. 229-249.
- Fries, Peter H. "Information flow in written advertising". *Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics 1992: Language, Communication and Social Meaning*. Ed. J. Alatis. Washington DC: Georgetown University Press. 336-52.
- Fries, Peter H. "On the status of Theme in English: Arguments from discourse". *Forum Linguisticum*, 6 (1981): 1-38. Also published in *Micro and Macro Connexity of Text. (Papers in Text Linguistics 45)*. Eds. János S. Petöfi & E. Sözer. Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1983. 116-152.
- Givón, Talmy "Iconicity, isomorphism and non-arbitrary coding in syntax." *Iconicity and Syntax*. Ed. J. Haiman. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985. 187-219.
- Ghadessy, Mohsen. "Thematic development and structural elements", *Occasional Papers in Systemic Linguistics*, Vol. 7 (1993), 1-25. Also published in *Thematic Development in English Texts*. Ed. M. Ghadessy. London and New York: Pinter, 1995. 129-146.
- Hall6dn, Ola. "Conceptual change and the learning of history". *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27.3 (1997): 201-210.
- Halliday, M.A.K. (1994) *Introduction to Functional Grammar*. London: Edward Arnold (1ST edition, 1985).
- Halliday, M.A.K. "The Construction of Knowledge and Value in the Grammar of Scientific Discourse: Charles Darwin's "The Origin of the Species"". *Writing Science: Literacy and Discursive Power*. Eds. M.A.K. Halliday and J.R. Martin London: The Falmer Press, 1993. 86-105.
- Halliday, M.A.K. "Language structure and language function". *New Horizons in Linguistics*. Ed. J. Lyons. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970. 140-165.
- Halliday, M.A.K. "Notes on transitivity and Theme in English. Part 1". *Journal of Linguistics* 3.1 (1967a): 37-81.
- Halliday, M.A.K. "Notes on transitivity and Theme in English. Part 2". *Journal of Linguistics* 3.2 (1967b): 199-244.
- James, Carl. *Contrastive Analysis*. London: Longman, 1980.

- Kaplan, Robert. "Contrastive Rhetoric". *Functional Approaches to Written Text: Classroom Applications*. Ed. T. Miller. The Journal of TESOL-France in association with U.S. Information Service, 1995. 21-39.
- Langacker, Ronald W. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Volume I: Theoretical Prerequisites*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987.
- Langacker, Ronald W. *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar. Volume II: Descriptive Application*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
- Larsen, Mariann. "Between text and grammar: the principle of iconicity". *Estudios Ingleses de la Universidad Complutense*, 1 (1993): 111-126.
- Lavid, Julia. *Thematic Development in Texts*. Technical Report, Deliverable R1.2.1., ESPRIT Basic Research Action: Dandelion, EP6665, 1994.
- Leinhardt, Gaea. "Instructional Explanations in History". *International Journal of Educational Research*, 27.3 (1997): 221-232.
- Long, Nie. "An analysis of texts of different genres in terms of thematic selections and process types". Unpublished manuscript, 1991.
- López García, Ángel. *Gramática del Español I. La oración compuesta*. Madrid: Arco/Libros, S.L. 1994.
- Lotfipour, Kazem & Forouzan Rezai-Tajani "Exploration in Thematization Strategies and their Discoursal Values in English". *Text* 16.2 (1996): 225-249.
- Martin, James R. "More than what the message is about: English Theme". *Thematic Development in English Texts*. Ed. M. Ghadessy. London and New York: Pinter, 1995. 223-258.
- Martin, James R. *English Text: System and Structure*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1992.
- Martin, James.R. *Factual Writing: Exploring and Challenging social reality*, London, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- Martin, James R. "Grammaticalising ecology: the politics of baby seals and kangaroos". *Language, Semiotics, Ideology*. Eds. T. Threadgold, E. A., Grosz, G. Kress y M.A.K. Halliday. Sydney: Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture (Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 3). 1986. 225-228.
- McCabe, Anne. *Theme And Thematic Patterns in Spanish and English History Texts*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Aston University, Birmingham. U.K., 1999.
- Mauranen, Anna. *Cultural Differences in Academic Rhetoric*. Peter Lang, 1993.
- Newsham, G. (1977) *The Paragraph in French and English*. Unpublished Ph.D. Thesis. Faculté des Sciences et de l'Éducation, Université de Montreal.
- Peirce, Charles S. 1839-1914. *Selected writings*. Ed. with an introduction and notes by Philip P. Wiener. New York : Dover Publications, cop. 1958.
- Prince, Ellen. F. "Toward a taxonomy of given-new information". *Radical Pragmatics*. Ed. P. Cole. New York: Academic Press, 1981. 223-255.
- Tomasello, Michael, ed. *The New Psychology of Language. Cognitive and Functional Approaches to Language Structure*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1998.
- Travnicek, Frantisek. "O Tak Zvanim Aktualnim Cleneni Vetním" [On so-called functional sentence perspective]. *Slovo a slovesnost* (Prague) 22 (1962): 163-171. Translated in Vasconcellos, M. *Theme and Focus: Cross-Language Comparison via Translations from Extended Discourse*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation, Georgetown University, 1985. (Appendix III: 229-248 by L. Valyiova).
- Ungerer, Friedrich and Hans-Jörg Schmid. *An Introduction to Cognitive Linguistics*. London and New York: Longman, 1996.
- Van Dijk, Teun.A. & Walter Kintsch. *Strategies in Discourse Comprehension*. New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1983.
- Vande Kopple, William J. "Given and New Information and Some Aspects of the Structures, Semantics, and Pragmatics of Written Texts." *Studying Writing: Linguistic Approaches*. Eds C.R. Cooper and S. Greenbaum. London: Sage, 1986. 72-111.
- Van Oosten, Jean. *The Nature of Subjects, Topics and Agents; a Cognitive Explanation*. Indiana University Linguistics Club: Boomington, Indiana, 1986.
- Vasconcellos, Muriel. "The Theme as message onset: its structure and characteristics". *Linguistics*, 30.1 (1992): 147-163.
- Wang, Ling. "The theory of Theme and its application to drama analysis". MA Thesis. Department of English Language and Literature. Peking University. 1992.

Xiao, Qun. "Toward Thematic Selection in Different Genres: Fables and Recipes". Unpublished manuscript, 1991.

Werlich, Egon. *A Text Grammar of English*. Heidelberg: Quelle & Meyer, 1976.

Von Wright, G.H. *Explanation and Understanding*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1971.

Whittaker, Rachel. "Theme, processes and the realization of meanings in academic articles". Ed. M. Ghadessy. 1995. 105-128.

Yarmohammadi, L. and E. Amal-Saleh. "Textual analysis of English and Persian written texts in contrast and its possible pedagogical implications". *Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 9.2 (1991): 1-26.

McCabe, Anne M., M^a Isabel Alonso Belmonte. 2001. Theme, transitivity and cognitive representation in Spanish and English written texts. *Círculo de Lingüística Aplicada a la Comunicación* 7, 27-40.
Published in *Revista Canaria de Estudios Ingleses* 40, 2000, 77-94, *Systemic Functional Linguistics across Genres: Present and Future Perspectives*, edited by Manuel A. Hernández Hernández.
Universidad Complutense de Madrid, ISSN 1576-4737, <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/CLAC>.

Publicado: 12 de septiembre de 2001

Actualizado pdf: 11 de marzo de 2023