

Theme: A Heuristic Method for Discourse Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper summarizes some preliminary results from an ongoing analysis of the relevance of *topical Theme* in the textual organization of discourse. The study involved a quantitative and qualitative exploration of the types and functions of topical Themes appearing in the *Lancaster Spoken English Corpus* (henceforth SEC).

The thesis presented here postulates that within the context of the SEC, thematic choices affect the structure and development of both clauses and natural texts. More precisely, the selection of ideational Theme prompts clauses satisfying different discourse needs. This, in turn, affects the dynamics of texts, specifically their *method of development* (Fries, 1983; Fries & Francis, 1992; Martin, 1992) and their *thematic progression* (Danes, 1974; Giora, 1983).

In the following sections I will outline the framework adopted for the present study. Then I will describe the investigation itself, first presenting the corpus on which it is based, and finally drawing some tentative conclusions.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this investigation, Theme has been approached from a 'separating' perspective (cf. Gundel, 1988: 211-212; Fries, 1983: 117), and so this category is dissociated from Topic and Given information. Accordingly, Topic is regarded as a non-structural category operating at the level of texts. Furthermore, Given/New information is

considered to be a structural category realized in English by focus placement in tone units, while Theme is a structural category which is realized by clause initial position.

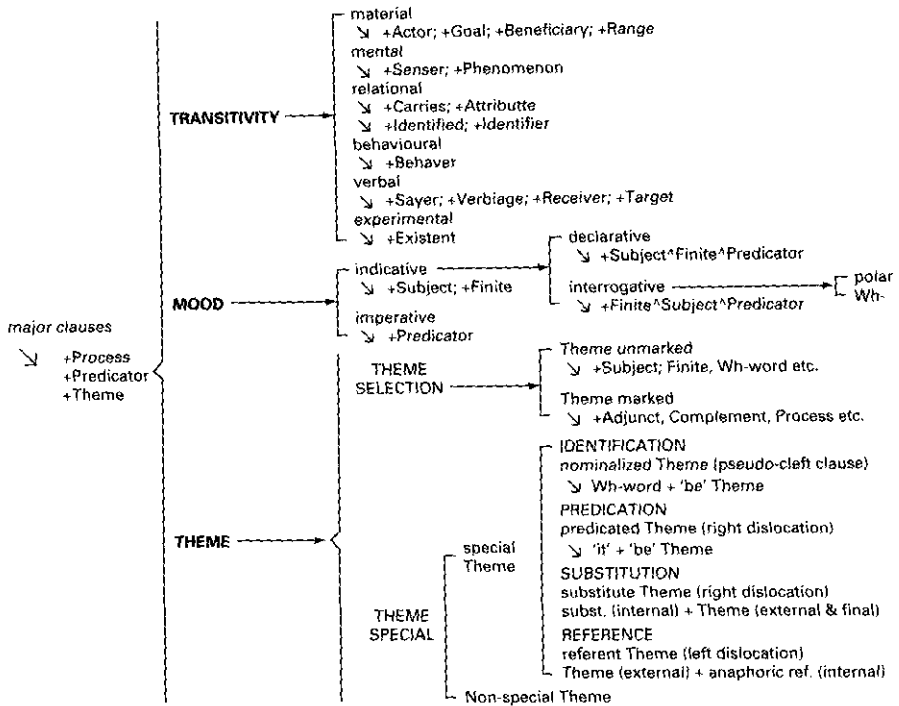
Topic tells us what a text is about *referentially*, that is, by means of non structural relationships of presupposition, which may be *situational* and/or *cohesive* (cf. Halliday, 1977). New information identifies what the speaker/writer presents as newsworthy in relation to what is not newsworthy. And Theme tells us what a clause is about in a *relational* sense, i.e. in relation to the grammatical system, from above, at the same level and from below.

From above the grammatical system, Theme acts as a deictic element expressing the speaker's angle on discourse. It signals what he/she has chosen as his/her point of departure, its scope extending over the ensuing discourse span (one clause or more). At the same grammatical level, that is, within the textual system of languages, clauses are about their Themes in that these act as structural 'staging' pegs (cf. Grimes, 1975: 322 ff.) with respect to their Rhemes, which at the same time develop their Themes. Finally, viewed from below the grammatical system, Theme extends up to and includes the first topical, or experiential element: a Participant, an Attribute, a Circumstance or a Process. These elements, when preceded by some *textual* and/or *interpersonal* elements, become constituents of a *multiple* Theme. In addition, the «theme system complex» to use Halliday's (1967: 200) term, intersects with the systems of Mood, Transitivity, Predication, Identification, Substitution and Reference (see Fig. 1).

In terms of Mood, Theme bears on thematic markedness, that is, on whether or not a clause concerns the element which the speech function would determine as its point of departure. On Transitivity grounds, Theme is connected to the selection of voice. Thus, in opposition to their active counterparts, passive clauses tend to be about non-Actor participants (Goal, Beneficiary, Range, or Complements to prepositions). Turning to 'special' Themes, when speakers choose a nominalised Theme, thematic aboutness specifies a Participant in a relational process. However if speakers choose a predicated Theme, aboutness asserts explicitly the thematic status of the highlighted element. If instead speakers select a substituted Theme, the matter metaphor is worded as an afterthought. Finally, if there is a reference Theme, aboutness indicates a Topic switch in discourse.

To summarize, the concept of Theme, whether it be simple, multiple or special, or whether it be marked or unmarked, is concerned with *thematic proportionalities*, i.e. different Theme-Rheme patterns which stand in textual opposition. Therefore, proportionalities involve no change in the propositional meaning of the message, but convey different *presuppositions*, i.e. assumptions on the part of the speakers regarding the state of knowledge of their addressees. In short, thematic choices help texts to be cohesive with respect to themselves and consistent with their contexts of

Figure 1: Theme system in English



situation or register, thereby affecting the wellformedness and interpretation of texts.

The aim of this study is to elicit, within the context of the SEC, the discourse motivations of Themes as paradigmatic choices from their corresponding system, and to show at the same time how such choices affect the method of development of texts. The results are presented in the following section.

2.1. The investigation: the corpus

The corpus analyzed comprises 49285 words broken down into ten textual categories of present day spoken British English: Commentary (A), News broadcast (B), Lecture Type I –aimed at general audience (C), Lecture Type II –aimed at restricted audience (D), Religious broadcast (E), Magazine style reporting (F), Fiction (G), Poetry (H), Dialogue (J) and Propaganda (K).

Table 1: The SEC Corpus (49,285 words)

Text	Category	Date	Length min. sec.	# Speakers	# Words	% Words
A01-A12	Commentary	11-24-84 06-22-85	64:30	12	9066	18,4
B01-B04	News Broadcasts	11-24-84 01-04-86	29:12	15	5235	10,6
C01	Lecture Type I	11-20-85	30:00	1	4471	9,1
D01-D03	Lecture Type II	—	57:00	3	7451	15,1
E01-E02	Religious Broadcast	11-26-85 11-27-85	11:18	2	1503	3,1
F01-F04	Magazine-style reporting	11-24-84 12- -86	25:30	14	4710	9,6
G01-G05	Fiction	06-25-85 01-28-87	46:25	5	7299	14,8
H01-H05	Poetry	11-26-86	9:00	5	1292	2,6
J01-J06	Dialogue	12- -86	37:28	9	6826	13,8
K01-K02	Propaganda	01-18-87 01-25-87	8:41	2	1432	2,9

As for the register of the texts, the *fields* of the exchanges range from news or financial reports, lectures and religious services, to different types of narrative (fiction, poetry, dialogue). The tenor is usually formal in interactions between active, well-defined speakers and passive, undefined audience. Finally, the *mode* is the spoken language¹ normally used on the radio to report information.

2.2. Theme and Mood

Only declarative clauses were scanned in this study. These yielded a total of 4594 Themes. Themeless clauses, representing 3 %, were excluded, such as *Finally, the headline again* (SECBPT02: 196) or *BBC news at eight o'clock on Saturday, the twenty-fourth of November* (SECBPT01: 5).

Most of these elliptical clauses belonged to the exophoric presentative type: their Themes were omitted because they conveyed information derived from the rhetorical context of situation, rather than from the previous or subsequent cotext. Although these clauses had no thematic structure of their own, they functioned as the 'Hyperthemes' (Martin, 1985) of the subsequent paragraphs. Specifically, they were used mostly by news readers at the beginning and at the end in order to present the Rheme, what is 'news', so to speak: the time, the speakers' names and the headlines.

Table 2: Registers in the SEC

categ.	field	tenor	mode			
			mode of presentation	channel	genre	theoretical purpose
A	new reports	informal	spoken language	radio	narrative (report)	to inform
B	new reports	formal	=	=	narrative (report)	to inform
C	lecture on economics	formal	=	=	expository	to divulge
D	university lectures	formal	=	=	expository	to teach
E	religious services	formal	=	=	instructive	to exhort
F	financial reports	formal	=	=	narrative (report)	to inform
G	stories	informal	=	=	narrative (fiction)	to entertain
H	poems	formal	=	=	narrative (poetry)	to discuss
J	dialogues	informal	=	=	argumentative	to discuss
K	charity appeals	formal	=	=	instructive	to exhort

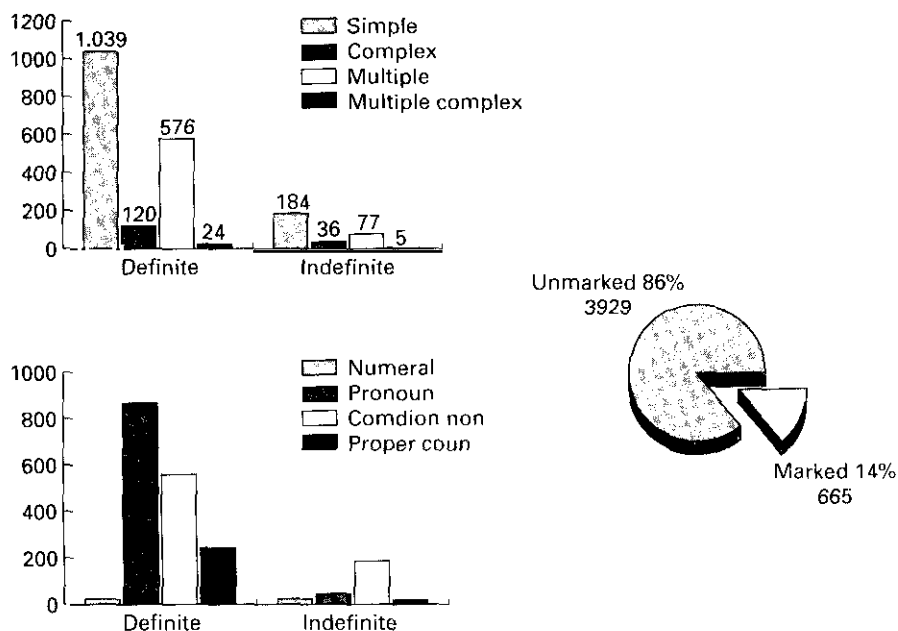
The majority of the non-elliptical clauses were main clauses. Embedded clauses (24 %) were disregarded in this study, since they proved to be comparatively irrelevant to the development of discourse. A majority of complex clauses were either simple or linked by additive or appositive coordination. Conjunctive and subordinating structural Themes were rare, presumably as a result of the speakers' intentions of being clear and brief.

As for the internal structure of non-embedded clauses, the relative frequency of the different types of processes was also analyzed, since their transitivity or ergativity patterns influence the selection of items more likely to be thematised. It is significant that material and verbal processes predominated over relational processes, which I believe results from the fact that most texts are reports. Since speakers have to reflect rather than comment on reality, they are more likely to select material or verbal processes, with which events are presented, than relational processes, which imply a «synoptic» interpretation of reality (see Halliday, 1977; Francis, 1989: 203).

Turning to the thematic structure, Figure 2 below shows that, typically, clauses in the SEC have an unmarked Theme. In terms of lexical density, the

majority of Themes were definite simple Themes or definite topical Themes within multiple Themes. This eased the information processing of the texts.

Figure 2: Theme and Mood: unmarked Themes



As Downing (1991) stresses, the choice of these unmarked Themes –mainly Subject pronouns, common nouns and proper names– contributed by and large to the topic continuity of texts, usually revealing Danes' *second* pattern or «TP with a continuous (constant) theme» (1974: 118). Thus Theme, Topic and Given information conflated, almost unfailingly. Themes tended to be presented by speakers as Known or Inferred information in their being expressed by definite nominal groups. At the same time, Themes became the Topics of the news extracts because the subjects of the extracts were normally repeated, extended or detailed throughout the paragraph(s) in clause initial position by means of substitution, reference or ellipsis. This is illustrated by the following example:

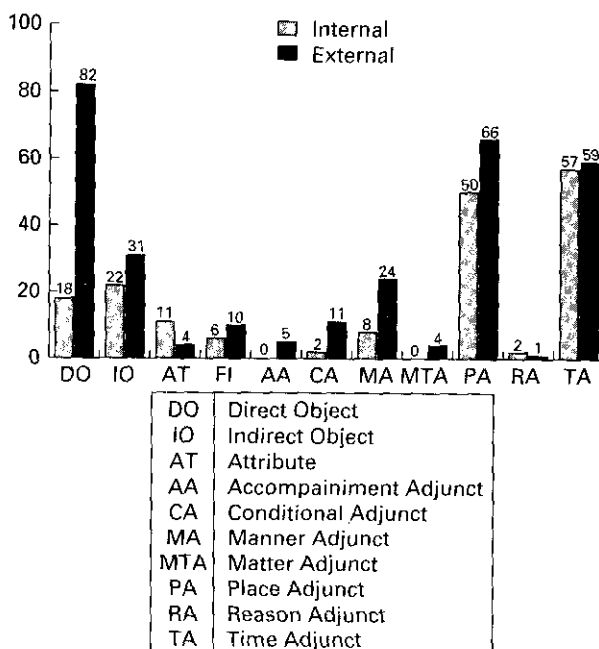
Topic: Mr. Norman Willis in the miners' conflict

- (1) The General Secretary of the TUC, Mr. Norman Willis, has said the Coal Board's strategy of trying to lure miners back to work by offering bonuses will fail. He told the miners at a the meeting in Chatham in Kent last night that the board should initiate new discussions with the mineworkers' union

in an effort to end the dispute. He *said* the TUC *would be getting an extra quarter of a million pounds to help striking miners*. Mr. Willis *was warmly applauded as he arrived at the meeting*; the last time he addressed striking miners, he *was jeered and a hangman's noose was dangled in front of him*. [SECBPT01: 54-63].

Moving on to marked Themes (14 %), Figure 3 shows that they were realized by clauses, PPS or AVPs. As their function is to achieve a foregrounding of the speaker's point of departure, most marked Themes were congruently spoken on a separate intonation contour or tone group. I have labeled these as 'external' marked Themes in contrast to those 'internal' marked Themes, which were not marked off by intonation. There appear to be some differences between both types of marked Themes in terms of scope and discourse motivations. Further research on this field remains to be done.

Figure 3: Marked Themes



Within marked Themes, Direct Objects and place and time Adjuncts were mostly promoted to 'psychological Subject' position. In the most literary texts, expanded Object Themes were restricted to presenting as New information the constituent that marked a topic shift over the ensuing discourse span. For example:

- (2) *These our prayers we offer in the spirit of Jesus Christ, as we pray together: Our father...* (E02: 018).
- (3) *The flowers we knew we welcome again in their turns –primrose, anemone, daffodil and tulip, blossom of cherry, blossom of pear and apple, Irish and columbine, and now the white cysts.* (H04: 011).
- (4) *But this she can not know* (H04: 027).
- (5) *No, this she can not know, nor indeed anything that we call knowledge, nor anything we call love and hope as ours.* (H04: 031).

Projected Object Themes appeared more frequently. Spoken on a separate intonation unit, they normally assured the thematic continuity with respect to the preceding context, as in the following cases:

- (6) *One of the Americans on the team said there was a very high probability that the body was that of Mengele. The odds against, he said, were astronomical* (SECBPT02: 92-94).
- (7) *Britain's decision to follow the Americans out of UNESCO won't come as a surprise. The necessary one year's notice has been given by the government, and like President Reagan, Mrs. Thatcher was convinced some time ago of the need to pull out. Eastern block influence inside Unesco is now too great, the government believes* (SECBPT03: 81-86).

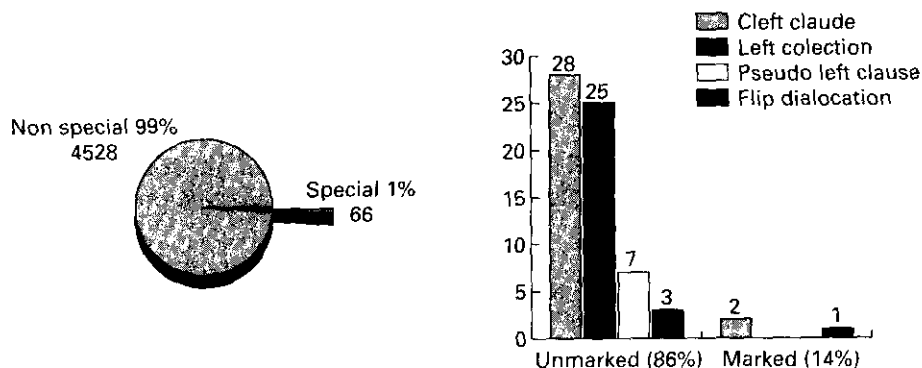
In all other cases, marked Themes provided mainly new temporal, spatial or manner frameworks for the subsequent context. All such frameworks were used to introduce new participants in discourse, or to present a difference with respect to the previous contextual state of affairs, whose span usually extended over more than one clause. For example:

- (7) *The Ethiopians say the flow of emergency supplies is slowing down, and that supplies sent by sea through the country's two main ports have practically stopped. Yesterday they took diplomats to the ports to underline the urgency of the situation. From Addis Ababa our East Africa correspondent Mike Wooldridge reports* (SECBPT01: 86-90).
- (8) *Normally visitors to the State Department require credentials and even then they have to pass through metal detectors, but twenty year old Edward Steven Doster managed to evade the security arrangements and carry a collapsible rifle inside and up to the seventh floor, where the Secretary of State has his offices. There, in another office, Doster shot his mother, forty-four year old Carol Doster, who worked as a secretary, and then turned the gun to himself. Both were dead by the time police arrived* (SECBPT02: 26-34).

2.3. Theme and other systems

Special Themes constituted only 1 % versus 99 % which were non-special (cf. Fig. 4). Thus, reports do not generally favour these constructions.

Figure 4: Theme and other systems: special Themes



Cleft and pseudocleft clauses were found mainly in persuasive style, where some information is accepted as known or presupposed in contrast with what is presumed to be unknown. Dislocations are typical of conversational, unplanned discourse, however, in which afterthoughts or initial cues may be used rather freely to ensure successful communication. Notwithstanding their infrequency, it is notable that special Themes were chosen in the news to satisfy specific discourse needs.

Thus, speakers usually chose pseudoclefts to specify a participant in the Rheme and to present it as news with respect to a thematic presupposition. For example:

- (9) What they should teach is *inner resourcefulness* (G05: 105).
- (10) But what was really quite amusing is *that the women who wore them would often wear very nice shoes at the bottom to sort of show that they were trying to be more Westernised, even though their husbands and family didn't allow them* (J06: 43-44).

On the other hand, Themes were predicated in order to establish an *exhaustive* or *exclusive contrast* with respect to the previous or subsequent context, as illustrated in the following examples:

- (11) It's men *who've benefited from the slackening pace of unemployment, but now this seems to be helping women as well* (SECBPT03: 28-34).
- (12) It's only when you stop to think about all the feasts laid on for us by the world's sportsmen and women, *that you realise that 1986 was, indeed, a vintage year for some hugely enjoyable overindulgence*. (J010: 22-024).

Left-dislocated Themes generally acted as *Topic switch devices* establishing a contrast or parallelism with respect to the previous context or introducing a new participant in discourse, as shown in:

- (13) As for Winnie, she's currently in the next pool, but she saw Nemo arrive, and according to her trainer, was very eager to meet her new mate (SECBPT02: 190-192).
- (14) A forty-Dyear old Palestinian, who'd been a fighter most of his life with a Libyan-backed group opposing Mr. Arafat, the one, in fact, that helped to force the PLO leader out of Tripoli last year, he is here. (A02: 051).

Finally, right dislocated Themes, the most scarce of all, seemed to be used to present the current discourse Topic as New information, as in the following instance:

- (15) *and it's sort of like the internal passport for Chinese, an identity card if you like* (J06: 490-491).

3. CONCLUSION

In this paper I have subscribed to the systemic concept of topical Theme as a textual category extending up to (and including) the leftmost constituent with a transitivity function in the clause. However, I have argued that we can account for the selection of Themes within clauses only by referring to their discourse co(n)text.

As a result, the present investigation has shown that the *method of development* of the SEC texts was based mainly on the selection of simple unmarked Themes (Subject pronouns or definite common NPs), which patterned texts into Danes' *thematic progression with a continuous Theme*. Occurring less frequently, marked Themes (fundamentally fronted adverbials) were used as topic switch devices, normally introducing a new stage in discourse. Special Themes, the most scarce of all as a consequence of the nature of the registers under analysis, functioned in various capacities: they acted as topic switch devices, they specified the thematic status of a constituent, they identified a Participant in a relational process or they were worded as afterthoughts.

Further research on thematic distribution should continue to analyze its varieties, its *discourse functions* and its *relation to different genres*. This would develop a two-fold approach to Theme, both as a discourse motivated paradigmatic choice in the system of language and as a heuristic method in text linguistics or discourse analysis.

END NOTES

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¹ For details on the «separating» vs. «combining» approaches to Theme, see Fries (1983; forthcoming).

² In spite of being spoken, the language used here is not spontaneous, but planned and formal. Gregory (1967: 192) defines this linguistic variety as «the speaking of what is written to be spoken as if not written».

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