

## DIFFERENT VIEWS ON THEME-RHEME IN ENGLISH

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### 1. Introduction

Theme has been defined in a variety of different ways, and for this reason, some analysts find the dismissal of the Theme/Rheme distinction easily defensible. For example, Stephen Levinson (1983: x) attributes the exclusion of the concept from his book to the following: "Terminological profusion and confusion, and underlying conceptual vagueness, plague the relevant literature to the point where little may be salvageable." An answer to this will be attempted further on. It is interesting to juxtapose this view of Theme with the fact that it is an analytical tool which has been increasingly gaining in popularity in the last few years. Mauranen (1993a: 104) attributes this popularity to "its interesting position at the interface of grammar and discourse". The definition of Theme used in this paper places Theme at the point where the grammar of the clause meets the surrounding text and also relates to the thought in the speaker's mind. However, before the position is further expounded, a discussion of the different definitions and views of Theme-Rheme is provided to shed more light over the issue. Basically, the different views can be divided into four categories, based on different definitions of the Theme itself: Theme as *topic*, Theme as *given* or *known*, Theme as having the least degree of *communicative dynamism*, and Theme

as *message onset*. Each of these will now be discussed in turn.

### 2. Theme as Topic

Vande Kopple (1986: 74) points out that Mathesius was one of the first linguists to describe the Theme/Rheme distinction "and his words probably still capture what most theorists mean by *theme*". In 1930 Mathesius published his essay **On Linguistic Characterology**, with illustrations from modern English. The publication was regarded as the beginning of the Prague School tradition. It analyzed the grammar of a language with the focus on the functions it served and the information flow, and "much attention was devoted to the grammatical and intentional means by which this distinction was maintained in discourse." (William, 1992: 37). Mathesius (1961) remarked that "a closer examination of sentences from the viewpoint of assertiveness shows an overwhelming majority of all sentences to contain two basic content elements: a statement and an element about which the statement is made." The element was "the basis of the utterance or the Theme" and the statement was "the nucleus of the utterance or the Rheme". He further invited readers' attention to the fact that "the basis of the utterance (the Theme) is often called the psychological subject and the nucleus (the

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Rheme) the psychological predicate.” (Mathesius, 1961: 81) This division was very important. It disclosed the fact that besides the grammatical subject and the grammatical predicate there were other subjects which stood out on the basis of their functions in the communication. According to Mathesius, Theme is the segment “that is being spoken about in the sentence” (in Daneš, 1974: p.106). Mathesius (1975) elaborates further by stating: “...an overwhelming majority of all sentences contain two basic elements: a statement and an element about which the statement is made” (81): the element about which the statement, or Rheme, is made is the Theme.

Researchers often prefer the use of the term *Topic* to *Theme* when referring to “aboutness”. For Dik (1980), the topic presents the entity about which the predication predicates something, while the Theme is something which is outside the predication proper, coming before the clause set off by breaks in intonation. Also, Witte (1983: 338), defines the topic of a sentence as “what the sentence is about”. As topic can be considered a “rather elusive category” (Downing, 1991: 121), pinning it can be problematic.

For Connor and Farmer (1990), topic can be explained as “simply the main idea or topic of the sentence” and can occur in many places in a sentence - beginning, middle, or end” (ibid: 128). They do, however, point out that this type of topic identification is fairly intuitive although they cite research which indicates high [interrater](#) reliabilities on sentence topic identification. Yet, there are many cases

where disagreement could occur, as in the following bit of text,

Without care from some other human being or beings, be it a mother, grandmother, sister, nurse, or human group, a child is very unlikely to survive. (Witte, 1983: 319)

Witte takes the Subject of the main clause - *a child* - to be the topic of the sentence. However, given that the writer begins with a prepositional phrase which could also have been placed after the main clause, one could just as easily argue that *lack of care* is topical in this particular sentence, not *a child*. While the term *topic* is the most commonly used term for aboutness, whether it be at the clause level or at a higher discursive level (Schlobinski and Schutze-Coburn, 1992), Theme has been used, by, for example, Jones (1977), to refer to the “main idea” or “central thread” of various levels of discourse. For the non-linguist, synonyms for theme include “subject” and “topic”, while for some linguists, the terms “theme” and “topic” are used interchangeably. At the same time, many linguists use the terminology of *topic/comment* and *Theme/Rheme* interchangeably. Witte and Cherry (1986) assign four functions to topic: i) to a greater or lesser degree, to express old or given information, ii) to announce what the sentence or t-unit is about, iii) to provide local coherence between individual sentences or t-units, iv) to guide the reader in constructing gists and identifying discourse topics.

In this section, then, we have seen that the notion of Theme as topic brings about problems due to the elusiveness of the term *topic* in discourse, for which

reason Theme as topic will not form the basis for analysis in the present study. We have further seen that topic is often equated with given or known. In the next section, we will discuss the notion of Theme as given, an equation which often comes about via the term topic.

### 3. Theme as Given or Known

The previous section on Theme as topic opened with Mathesius and his definition of Theme as topic. Daneš (1970) in his explanation of the principle of utterance and text organization termed Functional Sentence Perspective (henceforth FSP), which he attributes to Mathesius, expounds further:

Analyzing the organization of the utterance, we state as a rule its bipartite structure. The two parts (more precisely, the partial communicative functions assigned to them) may be defined from two different points of view:

1. Taking for granted that in the act of communication an utterance appears to be, in essence, an enunciation ... about something..., we shall call the parts THEME (something that one is talking about, TOPIC) and RHEME (what one says about it, COMMENT)...

2. Following the other line, linking up the utterance with the context and/or situation, we recognize that, as a rule one part contains old, already known or given elements, functioning thus as a “starting point” of the utterance.... (Daneš, 1970: 134).

However, he later clarifies that Mathesius maintained from the onset of his FSP studies that “...theme need not be a known piece of information” (Daneš, 1989: 25), and argues for a differentiation

of Theme as topic on the one hand, and known information on the other.

Yet many analysts do not make this distinction. In many studies based on the Theme/Rheme construct, these terms are often conflated with those of given/new. Babby (1980, in Vande Kopple 1991) identifies Theme as conveying old or given information. In his view, everything occurs in an informative declaration as if the speaker were answering a question; the speaker makes a mental composition of what the hearer knows and does not know and orders the proposition in the same way as a question. And, in fact, he ultimately rejects the terms Theme and Rheme, because of their “terminological inflation”.

While it is the case that many studies are more explicit as to the terms used for the concepts being analyzed and specifically use the terms “given” or “known” instead of Theme (likewise using “new” in place of Rheme), there are problems in analysis for these concepts.

Vande Kopple (1991) underscores the nature of the problem in his discussion of Prince's (1979, 1981) work on given and new information. Prince's analysis (based on a taxonomy of given/new on a scale which goes from unused and brand-new entities on one end to situationally or textually evoked on the other) provides “one of the clearer and more insightful analyses of these phenomena available” (Vande Kopple 1991: 315). Yet it is not without problems. The main problem is that the line between unused entities and inferable entities (in the middle of the scale) can often become blurred (a problem which

Prince herself acknowledges). What is unused information for one reader might be inferable information for another.

The key to the problem of given (or Theme as given) here is that the perspective is that of the reader (listener). In order to establish what is given in the clause, it is difficult to establish the beliefs and presuppositions that the speaker has about the hearer's knowledge about the world, the context and the co-text.

#### 4. Theme-Rheme in Communicative Dynamism

Jan Firbas has been more explicit about and consistent with the definitions of terms such as Theme/Rheme, and has employed his analysis with more precision than other analysts associated with FSP (Vande Kopple, 1986). In response to criticisms of the conflation of Theme/Rheme with given/new, Firbas proposed a tripartite configuration of the utterance-Theme, transition, and Rheme - depending on the degree of Communicative Dynamism (hereafter CD) the linguistic element contributes "toward the development of a given purpose" (Firbas, 1986). Within written language, the distribution of degrees of CD is affected by the interplay of three factors. The first factor is that of linear modification, a term Firbas borrows from Bolinger (1952), and which means that, provided there are no interfering factors, communicative importance gradually increases as it moves towards the end of sentence. The second and third factors, the context and the semantic structure respectively, are interfering factors in that they can work counter to linear modification. The factor of context means that an element

expressing known information, which is defined by Firbas as information retrievable from the immediate context carries a lower degree of CD than an element conveying a piece of irretrievable, new, unknown information. Therefore, context is hierarchically superior to linear modification and to semantic structure. The factor of semantic structure refers to some types of semantic content and some types of semantic relations, which, if they are context-independent, can work counter to linear modification. For example, some subjects are context independent, especially in the case of verbs which denote appearance or existence on the scene, e.g. *A boy came into the room.*

Distribution of CD over sentence elements, then, is determined by an interplay of the above factors. Therefore, development of communication cannot be considered as "a merely linear phenomenon" (Firbas, 1986: 46). The dynamics of communication belong to one of two processes. One of these is the foundation-laying process: all context-dependent elements are foundation-laying in that they provide a foundation upon which the remaining elements complete the information and fulfill the communicative purpose. The second is the core-constituting process, in which elements completing the information constitute the core of the information. The Theme is formed by the foundation-laying elements, while the core-constituting elements form the non-Theme, consisting of the transition (or those elements performing a linking function) and the Rheme.

While CD is more highly detailed than other analyses involving the

Theme/Rheme construct, it is not without problems. The first has to do with practicality: as Martin (1992a) points out, communicative dynamism is a matter of degree, there is no need to draw a line between Theme and Rheme. However, although there is some arbitrariness involved in deciding how far the Theme of an utterance extends, “it generally proves more practical to draw a categorical line between Theme and Rheme” (ibid: 151). Secondly, there is still some confusion as to how Theme is defined in CD: as Firbas states: “The theme expresses what the sentence is about and constitutes the point of departure in the development of the communication” (Firbas, 1986: 54)

#### 4. Theme as Message Onset

In this approach, both the meaning aspects and the formal aspects of Theme are considered, as they are both crucial for an understanding of the Theme/Rheme construct and its function. Further specification of the meaning of Theme according to Halliday involves reference to “point of departure”: “The Theme is the element which serves as the point of departure of the message” (Halliday, 1994: 37). While this conception of Theme may seem strictly positional, Fries (1983) makes the point that “there are good and sufficient internal grammatical reasons to say that the beginning is special for some reason” (118) and goes on to argue that “initial position in the sentence, or sentence level Theme, means ‘point of departure of the sentence as message’” (ibid: 119). Martin (1992a) provides evidence which indicates that “point of departure does

indeed mean something more than coming first” (151).

For Halliday, Theme “provides the environment for the remainder of the message, the Rheme.” (Halliday, 1994: 67). Davies (1997) echoes this when he explains that the Theme initiates “the semantic journey” of the clause, and he adds that if a different starting point is chosen for the journey, a different journey results. This idea is not a new one, as Bentham (1839: 268, in Bowers 1988: 92), while not using the label Theme, talks about the initial element of a sentence in a similar way: “If a word expressive of another idea come before it the mind is in the first instance put upon a wrong scent; and a sort of correction and partial change of conception must have place, before the idea meant to be conveyed is apprehended”. For Bloor and Bloor (1995: 72) the Theme in English is “the idea represented by the constituent at the starting of the clause”, while for Vasconcellos (1992: 147), the function of Theme is “to signal the relationship between the thought in the speaker's mind and its expression in discourse”. She bases her conception of Theme on work done by Travnick (1962), who believed the nature of Theme to be universal and invariant, expressing the view that all utterances have Theme, and that they occur without fail in initial position. Travnick's conclusion was that the principle of the Theme flows from the relationship between the speaker's object of thought and its expression in text. The key notion here is the relationship between the thought in the speaker/writer's mind and its expression in discourse. According to Travnick,

and later Vasconcellos, Theme realizes the connection between the thought and the continuation of the discourse. Speakers/writers choose one element or another for thematic position based on the thought they wish to express and based on how they wish to connect that thought to the surrounding text.

The Theme, then, has at least a double function: to express the thought of the speaker and to indicate the relationship of that thought to the co-text. Does bringing in of the speaker's thought, of cognition, go too far beyond Halliday's conception of Theme? For cognitive linguists, the psychological dimension of language is necessary in models of language and language use in order to "specify in what different ways natural language users can play on" (Dik, 1997b: 58). Butler also feels that "a theory of language as communication must explore the important relationships between language and cognitive structures and processes" (Butler, 1998: 71). Givón is also committed to "taking cognition and neurology seriously", and states: "We will continue to assume here that language and its notional/functional and structural organization is intimately bound up with and motivated by the structure of human cognition, perception and neuropsychology" (Givón, 1995:16). Within Systemic Functional Grammar, Halliday himself has never been particularly concerned with the cognitive side of language, preferring to concentrate on sociological factors. Nevertheless, the two elements are by no means incompatible, and attempts have been made by Fawcett (1980) to integrate them into a single,

socio-psychological framework which has been applied to the description of English.

All the same, in a descriptive text analysis such as this one, it is necessary to work from the evidence at hand: the texts themselves. From a cognitive/psychological point of view, in a Theme/Rheme study, it might be of interest to engage in a protocol analysis of the Thematic choices made by a writer. Conversely, it might also be of interest to carry out a similar type of study from the reader's perspective, analyzing the cognitive processes taking place during reading with respect to textual organization (cf. van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983; Vande Kopple, 1986). Neither of these types of studies are used here; the study centers on the linguistic outcome of cognitive processes, not on the cognitive processes themselves.

Through analysis of the text itself and its Theme/Rheme structure "...we can gain an insight into its texture and understand how the writer made clear to us the nature of his underlying concerns" (Halliday, 1994: 67). Halliday describes the Theme of the clause as always containing an experiential element: either a participant, a circumstance or a process (Halliday, 1994: 52). These are the elements of the system of transitivity, which 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). The experiential component is: the linguistic expression of the speaker's experience of the external world, including the inner world of his own consciousness - his emotions, perceptions and so on. This

component of the grammar provides a conceptual framework for the encoding of experience in terms of processes, objects, persons, qualities, states, abstractions and relations; it is sometimes referred to as “cognitive”, and experiential meaning as “cognitive meaning”, although as suggested earlier all components presuppose a cognitive level of organization...The term “experiential” makes it clear that the underlying function is seen not as the expression of “reality” or “the outer world” but as the expression of patterns of experience; the content given to an utterance by this portion of the language system derives from the shared experience of those participating in the speech situation. (Halliday, 1968: 209).

Enkvist (1984) also brings in the notion of expression of experience in his discussion of word-order variation, which is key in a discussion of Theme-Rheme choice. For word-order choice, he posits three possible principles, which he terms “textual” as “they involve parameters outside or beyond the sentence” (Enkvist, 1984: 56). The first of these is information structure - old information first, new later. The second is what he terms “textual iconicism”, where a clause may mirror the pattern of a preceding clause exactly or chiastically (e.g. he came in triumph and in defeat departs). The final principle relates to the previous quote by Halliday, and Enkvist terms it “experiential iconicism”, which means “isomorphy between the text and our experience of the world...symbols of the text are ordered in the same way as their referents in the world of things or the world of events” (ibid: 56). He underscores three major types: temporal, spatial, and social, and states that “...corpus studies show the

importance of experiential iconicism in texts that have to order experience for the benefit of the receptor. Such texts are instructions, for instance guidebooks and cookery-books” (ibid: 57). For Halliday, moving from thematic Given to a rhematic New allows a “movement in time” which “construes iconically the flow of information” (Halliday, 1993b: 92). Martin (1995) discusses the range of information available for selection as topical Theme in a particular text as being the characters in the narrative and the entire contents of the room. This notion of the range of items available for Theme as limited is also shared by Fries: “the perceived simplicity or complexity of the development of the ideas in a text will correlate with the degree to which the experiential content of the Themes of the text may be seen to be derived from a limited set of semantic fields” (Fries, 1995: 324).

Therefore, the use of “cognitive” (or “idea” or “thought in the speaker’s mind”) related to the notion of Theme is used here to refer to the expression 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 discursal role. This combined function of Theme goes some way in explaining some of the problems involved with pinning down the function of Theme. At times, the

speaker/writer chooses as the point of departure a Theme which relates to the surrounding text and reflects concerns of the overall text. At other times, the speaker/writer chooses a Theme which reflects the concerns of the immediate clause. As Berry (1996: 18) expresses it:

[discourse Theme] is something that a speaker or writer has in relation to a text or large section of a text, a priority set of types of meaning that reflects his/her underlying concerns for the duration of the text or large section of text, and that [clause Theme] is something that a speaker or writer has in relation to a particular clause, a (set of) meaning(s) that reflects his/her priority for that particular clause.

As explained above, the choice of Theme manifests a number of different pressures (not least grammatical constraints): discursual pressures include the wish to relate the point of departure of one clause with something that has come before, and experiential pressures, which include the desire to represent iconically the pattern of experience through the clause. Added to this is the notion that “the priority concerns, discursual or clausal, of a

speaker or writer need not be ideational” (Berry, 1996: 19). To support this statement she refers to Brown and Yule (1983: 141-3) and their analysis of a passage of spoken English, in which the interactional aspect, through the subject pronouns *I* and *you* are thematized. The main concerns in this spoken passage are interpersonal.

This conception of Theme separates it from notions of givenness and aboutness. While, as stated above, the view of Theme taken here is separate from that of given, it is the case that often Theme and given are conflated. If we take the function of Theme as connecting the speaker/writer’s perception of reality with the surrounding discourse, it is often the case that the item chosen for thematic position will be something already given in the previous discourse: “other things being equal, the speaker will choose as ‘that from which to proceed in his discourse’ something that is ‘known or at least obvious’ to the listener” (Halliday, 1985b: 99). However, that is not always the case, “other things are not always equal” (ibid: 99), which means that, at times, speaker/writers will choose to introduce a new concern into the discourse and will do so by encoding that item as Theme.

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## XÉT CÁC QUAN ĐIỂM KHÁC NHAU VỀ KHÁI NIỆM ĐỀ-THUYẾT TRONG TIẾNG ANH

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Bài viết này xem xét các quan điểm khác nhau về khái niệm Đề-Thuyết trong tiếng Anh. Định nghĩa về đề ngữ được dựa trên bốn góc độ: đề ngữ là chủ đề; đề ngữ là cái cho sẵn hoặc cái đã biết; đề ngữ là bậc thấp nhất trong động năng giao tiếp và đề ngữ là khởi đầu của thông điệp.

Trong tất cả các ngôn ngữ, câu bao giờ cũng mang tính chất một thông điệp. Câu có hình thức tổ chức để làm cho nó có giá trị thông báo và có nhiều cách để thực hiện việc này. Khi nói hoặc viết, người ta định hướng khai triển của tư duy bằng cách chọn đối tượng này hay đối tượng khác trong sự tình được diễn đạt làm đề tài để nhận định, để nói một điều gì đó về nó. Cái bộ phận của câu được chọn làm đề tài ấy được gán một cương vị đặc biệt và được đưa ra làm đề ngữ. Bộ phận này kết hợp với phần còn lại của câu - thuyết ngữ - làm thành một thông điệp. Theo định nghĩa này, đề ngữ là yếu tố được dùng làm điểm xuất phát của thông điệp, là cái mà câu liên quan đến. Nó là cơ sở, điểm tựa làm bàn đạp cho sự khai triển hành động nhận định của tư duy.