A Critical Review of the Theme System: Implications for Language Education

Nayel Al-Sharah *

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a brief outline of the Theme system within systemic-functional grammar. It focuses on the concept of Theme and the different positions taken by systemic-functional linguists. It is also concerned with questions raised about Halliday's Theme analysis: function, definition, identification of Theme, the three kinds of meaning which are realised in Theme, and representation of multiple Themes in the clause. Further, the paper presents new developments in Theme analysis, i.e. alternative Theme analytical frameworks emerging from Halliday's approach to Theme analysis. The paper closes with implications for language learning and teaching, regarding the potential of Theme analysis in exploring and revealing how texts develop, and the role of thematic choices and thematic progression in the cohesion, coherence and development of text.

Keywords: Theme System, Language Education.

INTRODUCTION

In the systemic functional approach, "language is interpreted as a system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realised. This puts the forms of a language in a different perspective: as means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves" (Halliday, 1985/1994: xiv). If this is the case, then the Theme *system*, among other systems included in functional grammar, is one which should reveal how form is used to serve meaning.

According to Halliday (1985), language simultaneously conveys three kinds of meanings: ideational or experiential, interpersonal and textual. The following quotation illustrates the relationship among these meanings or metafunctions:

> "... the fundamental components of **meaning** in language are functional components. All languages are organised around two main kinds of meaning, the "ideational" or reflective, and the "interpersonal" or active. These components, called "manifestations in the terminology of the present theory, are the manifestations in the linguistic system of the two very general purposes which underlie all uses of language: (i)

to understand the environment (ideational), and (ii) to act on the others in it (interpersonal). Combined with these is a third metafunctional component, the "textual", which breathes relevance into the other two" (Halliday, 1985: xiii).

In systemic functional linguistics, a language is described as a social semiotic phenomenon for making meanings. It is a means of social interaction. To make meanings, a language user needs a *paradigmatic* set of choices or options (*system*), realised by *syntagmatic* units (*structure*) (Ventola, 1988). In the English Language, for instance, a clause may be *major,* when it has a *finite* element such as "does" or *minor,* when it does not have a *finite* element; as language users we choose between a *major* or *minor* clause. Further, within *major* clauses, we can have a choice between *indicative* and *imperative*, and within *indicative* clauses, we can choose between *declarative* and *interrogative* clauses. All these *paradigmatic* sets of choices are open to users of the English Language.

The question which arises here is: *How are such paradigmatic choices realised in the English Language?* As noted above, a language *system* is realised by *structure*. For example, while the *declarative* clause *Women should leave their homes* is realised by the *structural* or *syntagmatic* elements: Subject-Finite-Predicator-Complement, the *interrogative* clause *Should women leave their homes?* is realised structurally by

*Department of Curriculum and Instruction, University of Jordan, Amman, Jordan.

Finite-Subject-Predicator-Complement.

In sum, *syntagmatic* structures are functional elements which realise meaning choices. Thus, formal aspects of the language are used to serve and help make meanings. Hence comes the significance of systemic functional grammar in providing analytical frameworks for discourse analysis, frameworks which proceed from meaning to form, and which look at form as a way of realising meaning choices. The aim of functional grammar, for Halliday (1985/94), is "to construct a grammar for purposes of text analysis: one that would make it possible to say sensible and useful things about any text, spoken or written, in modern English" (p. xv). Further, functional grammar helps text analysts "understand the quality of texts: why a text means what it does, and why it is valued as it is" (p. xxx). One functional analysis which may serve the purpose of text analysis is the Theme *system*.

The present paper is intended to address two main questions:

1. How is the Theme system approached by different systemist linguists?
2. What implications does the Theme system have for language education?

In what follows, I shall discuss the Hallidayan approach to Theme, as well as other thematic analytical frameworks which have been developed within the Hallidayan approach.

The Theme system within Halliday's functional grammar
Definition of Theme

In systemic functional linguistics, the clause is regarded as the basic element of a text; when it is analysed as a message, a clause is divided into one or more Themes and a Rheme (Halliday, 1985/1994). A Theme is functionally defined by Halliday as "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message" which is "indicated by position in the clause" (p. 37). This definition of Theme appears to differ from what Halliday at other times describes as "what the clause is going to be about", or sometimes as "that with which the clause is concerned" (Halliday, 1985/1994: 37). It is important to note that Halliday distinguishes between the meaning, or function, of Theme, and its identification. With respect to the identification of Theme, Halliday (1985/1994) says that "the Theme can be identified as that element which comes in first position in the clause" (p. 38). This means that a Theme can be realised by one of the following grammatical constituents: a subject, verb, complement or adjunct.

Three kinds of meaning of Theme

According to Halliday, the three basic meanings or metafunctions are realised through functional structures, and form "the basis of the semantic organisation of all natural languages" (Halliday, 1985: 53). Ideational meaning is represented through the use of language to express "our experience of the world that lies about us, and also inside us, the world of our imagination. It is meaning in the sense of 'content'". This kind of meaning is used in language "to describe events and states and the entities involved in them" (Thompson, 1996: 28). At the clause level, the ideational meaning or metafunction is represented by **processes, participants and circumstances**. For example in the clause *Women should work outside their homes*, the ideational meaning is represented by the three components forming the clause as illustrated in the following figure from Thompson (1996):

Figure 1: Elements of the *ideational meaning* at the clause level

Women	should work	outside their homes.
Participant: Actor	Process: Material	Circumstance

Interpersonal meaning, on the other hand, is related to what the speaker/writer does to the listener/reader by means of discourse. "The interpersonal function of the **clause** is that of exchanging role in rhetorical interaction: statements, questions, offers, and commands, together with accompanying modalities" (Halliday, 1985: 53). The above clause can be analysed according to the interpersonal perspective, but with different labels, as given by Thompson (1996) below:

Figure 2: Elements of the interpersonal meaning at the clause level

Women	should	work	outside their homes.
Subject	Finite	Predicator	Adjunct

Finally, the textual meaning is concerned with the organisation of the message. It is related to "the context, both the preceding (and following) text, and the context of situation" (Halliday, 1985: 53). At the clause level, this kind of meaning is represented by two functional structures: Theme and Rheme. The above example can be analysed textually as follows:

Figure 3: Elements of the textual meaning at the clause level

Women	should work outside their homes.
Theme	Rheme

Multiple Themes in the clause

Halliday (1985) divides the clause as message into one or more Themes and one Rheme. These Themes in turn are further divided into textual, interpersonal and ideational Themes related to the meanings discussed above. They are also identified in the clause by their position as initial-elements, provided that they have the following order: textual ∧ interpersonal ∧ ideational or experiential. However, "a conjunctive and modal adjunct may appear together in Theme", in such a case, "the modal adjunct normally precedes the conjunctive one" (Thompson, 1996: 137), and the order of Theme becomes: interpersonal ∧ textual ∧ ideational or experiential.

According to Halliday (1985: 53), one of the functional principles on which the structure of a multiple Theme is based is that "a clause is the product of three simultaneous semantic processes. It is at one and the same time a representation of experience, an interactive exchange, and a message." In one clause, one may find one or more kinds of Theme manifest. In what follows, I shall present a brief account of the three types of Theme:

Ideational Themes

As noted above, according to Halliday, every clause in a language has a Theme which represents the ideational meaning of a clause. This meaning of Theme is realised functionally by the structures of *transitivity*, or **process and its constituents**, which are related to each other: the process itself, which is identified by the verb as a structural part, the participant which is identified by either the subject or object as structural parts, and the circumstance which is identified structurally by the adverbial. Any one of the elements of the clause may function thematically, provided that it is used as the "point of departure of the message" (Halliday, 1985: 38). In Hallidayan Theme analysis, what follows the ideational Theme is part of Rheme.

Further, Halliday (1985) draws a distinction between marked and unmarked Theme. "The Subject is the element that is chosen as Theme unless there is a good reason for choosing something else" (p.43). While the choice of the Grammatical Subject is unmarked, the choice of constituents other than Subject, such as complement or circumstance, is marked. In English the grammatical subject normally appears at the beginning of a clause in declaratives, which is the commonest and most natural. Look at the following example, which shows the Subject as an unmarked ideational Theme:

Figure 4: Grammatical Subject as an Ideational (Topical in Halliday's terms) Theme

Women	should stay at home for two main reasons.
Ideational (Topical) Theme: Participant	Rheme

However, the other elements (marked Themes) may be "strongly foregrounded" (Halliday, 1985/1994: 45) for emphasis, or for calling "attention to bits of information or to invest them with a highly charged quality" (Vande Kopple, 1991: 321). The following example indicates a circumstantial adjunct as a marked ideational Theme:

Figure 5: Circumstantial Adjunct as an Ideational Theme

During the last century	women's role in most societies have undergone many changes.
Ideational Theme: Circumstantial Adjunct	Rheme

With respect to process as Theme, this is realised by Theme in *imperative* clauses, as illustrated by Figure 6 below:

Figure 6: Process as an Ideational (Topical in Halliday's terms) Theme

Come Don't come	to school early.to school late.
Ideational (Topical) Theme: Process.	Rheme

As mentioned above, every clause must have an ideational type of Theme, marked or unmarked. However, a clause can have one or two other types of Themes (interpersonal and/or textual) as well as the ideational Theme. Such categorisation allows for multiple Themes.

Interpersonal Themes

Halliday (1985: 53) defines interpersonal meaning as "a form of action: the speaker or writer doing something to the listener or reader by means of language". With respect to Theme, interpersonal meaning or metafunction in the clause is realised through modal adjuncts such as 'perhaps', 'probably', 'evidently', 'interestingly' and 'amazingly', and in vocatives such as the addressees, 'You men', and 'Alice'.... For Halliday, if such an interpersonal meaning precedes the ideational meaning, then it functions thematically, becoming an interpersonal Theme followed by ideational Theme. Here is an example:

Figure 7: Multiple Theme as represented in one clause

Fortunately,	the conditions under which women used to work	have changed over the last few decades.
Interpersonal Theme	Ideational Theme	Rheme

If otherwise, i.e. if this interpersonal meaning is preceded by the ideational element, then it does not work thematically, it becomes part of Rheme. Only one ideational Theme is identified. Here is an example:

Figure 8: Modal Adjunct (interpersonal meaning) as part of Rheme

The conditions under which women used to work,	*fortunately*, have changed over the last few decades.
Ideational Theme	Rheme

As noted above, in the first example (Figure 7) when the modal adjunct *fortunately* is used in initial position, it is classified as an interpersonal Theme according to Halliday (1985); and the grammatical subject *the conditions ...* functions as an ideational Theme. However, in the second example, when the ideational meaning is represented in the grammatical subject *The conditions...* in initial position, followed by the modal adjunct *fortunately* the ideational meaning functions thematically whereas the interpersonal meaning represented by *fortunately* does not work thematically any more and becomes part of the Rheme. The same applies to the textual meaning when it follows the ideational meaning.

Textual Themes

According to Halliday (1985), textual meaning is "relevance to the context: both the preceding (and the following) text, and the context of situation" (p. 53). Textual meaning helps a writer combine clauses together to form a coherent text. It also enables a writer to relate the text to context. Such textual meaning is realised by (i) 'continuatives' such as 'yes', 'no', 'well', and 'now', (ii) conjunctive adjuncts such as 'moreover', 'furthermore', 'however', 'as a result', and 'for example', (iii) co-ordinating and subordinating conjunctive such as 'and', 'but', 'or', and 'if' and (iv) definite and indefinite relatives such as 'who', 'where', 'what', and 'whoever', 'whatever', and 'wherever'. However, as noted above, according to Halliday, these textual meanings function thematically only when they are used in initial positions before ideational Themes; if otherwise, textual meanings become part of the Rheme. Here are examples:

Figure 9: Textual Theme preceding Ideational Theme

For example,	men's views about women	have changed.
Textual Theme	**Ideational Theme**	**Rheme**

Figure 10: Textual Conjunctive Adjunct in the Rheme part

Men's views about women,	*for example*, have changed.
Ideational Theme	**Rheme**

To conclude, Halliday's position on Theme can be summarised as follows: As regards the definition of Theme, Halliday (1985/1994) provides us with three definitions of Theme: "the element which serves as the point of departure of the message"; "what the clause is going to be about"; and "that with which the clause is concerned" (p.37). These three definitions appear to be somewhat different. With respect to the identification of Theme, "as a general guide, Theme can be identified as that element which comes in first position of the clause" (p. 38). Hence, a Theme can be one of the following grammatical constituents: subject, verb, complement or adjunct, providing that there is within these constituents an ideational/topical element identifying: a process (verb), a participant (grammatical subject or complement), or a circumstance (circumstantial adjunct or dependent clause). As regards multiple Theme, Halliday includes as part of Theme textual and/or interpersonal elements, providing that these elements precede an ideational (topical) Theme in a clause. So, a textual element such as a conjunctive adjunct or an interpersonal element such as a modal adjunct may function thematically if they precede an ideational element such as a participant, process or circumstance. Finally, Halliday distinguishes between marked and unmarked Theme in declarative clauses. The subject is usually chosen by language users as Theme "unless there is a good reason for choosing something else" (p. 43). Thus, the choice of other constituents such as a circumstance or a complement is treated as marked. In English, the complement is seen as the most marked choice.

Questions raised by researchers about the function, definition and identification of Theme

From the above discussion of the Hallidayan account of Theme, it would appear that there are questions about the function of Theme, the definitions of Theme, and about the identification of Theme. The problem arises most clearly when we see that Halliday's definitions of Theme are not matched clearly with identification. This is a problem which has been raised by a number of researchers such as Davies (1997), Vande Kopple (1991),

Hudson (1986), and Huddleston (1988 and 1991).

According to Vande Kopple (1991), Halliday's discussion of given-new information and of the different kinds of Theme and a Rheme is difficult to follow. Even when Halliday comes to define Theme, he gives a number of definitions which seem to be unclear, especially when he defines Theme as "the point of departure of the clause" (Halliday, 1985: 38) and when he sometimes describes Theme as what "the clause is going to be about" (p. 39). These two descriptions or functions of Theme: the point of departure for the clause, and what the clause is about, are not necessarily the same (Vande Kopple, 1991). Hudson (1986) and Huddleston (1988 and 1991) addressing the problem of Theme definition both describe Halliday's definition and interpretation of Theme as "vaguely defined" (Hudson, 1986: 798). They also question Halliday's justification of his definitions and interpretations. Hudson, for instance, comments:

> Indeed, one wonders what criteria [Halliday] himself is using to identify themes when one reads that the subordinating conjunction *that* is a theme in the clause it introduces (P. 51) - it is very hard to see it as defining what the clause is going to be about, and if it is 'the point of departure' of the clause, it can only be in the sense of being the first element (p. 798).

Huddleston (1991: 97) presents a detailed critique of Halliday's definitions of Theme as what the clause is about, "that which is the concern of the message", and the "point of departure". For example, with respect to the concept of 'aboutness', Huddleston narrows "the notion of Theme to the notion of topic". He associates the notion of 'aboutness' with topicality, i.e. ideational Theme. He states three reasons for the relation between 'aboutness' (topicality) and Theme:

> In the first place, the concept of what a clause, sentence or utterance is about is one commonly invoked in the non-systemic literature - there is here the potential for some point of contact between Systemic-Functional scholars and others. Secondly, it is reasonable to regard the

topical Theme as the prototypical or most readily graspable kind of Theme: if we can't get clear on what Halliday means by topical Theme, we are not likely to get far in understanding textual and interpersonal Themes, or Theme in the more general sense that subsumes all three kinds. In this connection I would ask what kind of Theme is marked by the Japanese and Tagalog particles. Do these mark Theme in this general sense or, as I suspect, just topical Theme? Thirdly, the concept of what the clause is about or concerned with plays a highly prominent role in Halliday's explanation of Theme (Huddleston, 1991: 97).

Davies (1988b and 1997), followed by Gosden (1993 and 1994), also addresses the problem of function, definition and identification of Theme. In her (1988b and 1997) studies, Davies postulates two potential functions of Theme: the identification of Topic, which is realised by grammatical subject (GS), and the provision of contextual frame (CF) which is realised by sentence-initial elements preceding the GS. Such elements may be conjunctions functioning as textual elements or themes, modal adjuncts functioning as interpersonal elements or themes, and circumstantial adjuncts functioning as ideational elements or themes. The following example, taken from the sample of the present study, shows the distinction between the two functions:

During the last century, **(Contextual Frame)** *women's role in most societies* **(Topic)** have undergone many changes.

In the above example, the underlined part, according to Davies, functions as a Contextual Frame (CF) Theme, and the italicised part functions as a Topical/Subject Theme. Further, Davies looks at the CF Theme as an optional element, serving "the function of signalling changes in real-world, fictional, or discourse circumstances" (Davies, 1997: 55). On the other hand, she sees the Topical/Subject Theme as an obligatory element that makes "the major contribution to the identification and of maintenance of topic continuity in a text" (p. 55).

Thus, both types of Themes are necessary for the development and progression of discourse. At one end of the scale, the re-occurrence of topical Theme, as equated with the "intuitive notion of 'what the clause/sentence is about',... is seen not only to specify topic, what a

particular stretch of text is about, but also to be the primary means by which the continuity and hence cohesion of coherent discourse is achieved" (Davies, 1997: 55). Hence, the topical Themes realised by the GSs may be considered as a powerful, potential textual resource. Their potential derives from (i) their being recurrent components in discourse, (ii) their prominent structural position in the clause, (iii) their functional semantic roles in creating coherence in text, and (iv) as noted above, their being the primary participants in the clause. At the other end of the scale, sentence-initial elements, which precede Topical/subject Themes, albeit their non-recurrent nature, function, as noted above, as contextualising or framing Themes, vital for "signalling changes" and stages in the development of topic and progression of discourse. Further, Davies, in her work on marked and unmarked Themes, departs from Halliday, and we can note this departure clearly when she says:

"Thus while following Halliday in requiring an Ideational element as obligatory in Theme, here, constituents of Theme are not categorised with reference to Halliday's Textual, Interpersonal and Ideational functions, but with reference to the categories of Topic and Contextual Frame" (Davies, 1997: 77).

However, this relatively conservative move leaves Davies (1988) with another problem: the grammatical subject may sometimes follow the main verb as in: *In the centre of the stage, suspended, upside down from the ceiling [was] a life-size life-like effigy of a horse.* (Davies, Lecture Notes 1997).

Berry (1989) also deals with the problem although she does not explicitly address it. In her analysis of children's texts, she includes everything up to the verb as part of Theme. In her (1989) study of school children's successful writing, Berry extended Theme to include everything preceding the verb of the main clause. The purpose of the study was to explore the way in which the distribution of topical Themes (topic-based Themes) contributed to the success or failure of written texts in the target genre. The task for these children was to write a passage about an English place called Grantham to be included in a guide book. The precise instructions given to the children were:

Pretend that a new Tourist Guide to Great Britain is being published by one of the major motoring organisations. They have asked you to write a

piece of prose to attract tourists to Grantham. (Berry, 1989: 67)

Berry bases her (1989) analysis on a number of principles: (i) she considers only the Themes of the main clauses, (ii) she only analyses the declarative main clauses, ignoring the imperative and interrogative clauses as raising great problems for thematic analysis, (iii) she includes in the Theme everything that precedes the verb of the main clause; she includes as part of Theme any subordinate clause preceding the main clause, and (iv) she regards a Theme "as *interactional* if it included a word/phrase which referred to the writer or reader(s) of the passage, and as *topic-based* if it include[s] a word/phrase which referred to something which could be regarded as an aspect of the topic" (Berry, 1989: 71). In this study, Berry appears to exclude the existential "there" Themes from her analysis, although they were used by children somewhat frequently. Her justification for excluding these Themes from her analysis is because "they are neither topic-based nor interactional" (p. 73).

From the above, it would appear that there is a general consensus that the grammatical subject represents "the concern of the message" or "what a message is about", and thus is a candidate for Theme. Further support for this idea comes from a consideration of the relative status of the participants, and circumstances of the process relations in the transitivity structure. As Halliday himself notes, circumstances are optional whereas participants and process are obligatory. This would suggest that in declaratives, participants, as the obligatory elements, must be a candidate for thematic status, if Theme represents the concern of the message.

New developments in Theme analysis

As emphasised by Berry (1989) and Davies (1997), there is an increasing need to sharpen and refine the analytical tools which are to be applied in the analysis of discourse. It is worthwhile here to quote Berry:

> Descriptive frameworks in the field of textlinguistics and discourse analysis are notoriously problematic. Categories are ill-defined and if one attempts to work on the basis of past practice, one finds that previous practitioners have been inconsistent in their application. If we wish to proceed with thematic analysis in the Hallidayan tradition, a good deal

of preliminary work will clearly be essential in order to overcome the problems raised, for example, by Hudson (1986) and Huddleston (1988)" (Berry, 1989: 77-78).

As noted above, although Halliday's Theme system remains the basis for all Theme analyses in systemic functional grammar, other systemic researchers such as Davies (1988b and 1997), followed by Gosden (1993 and 1994), and Berry (1989 and 1996) have adopted other (personal) views of Theme and its realisation in texts. In what follows, I shall summarise these new developments of Theme analysis.

Different types of Theme

In addition to the categorisation of Theme into Contextual Frame Themes (CFTs) and Topical/Subject Themes (TTs), Davies (1988) provides us with a new way of looking at how interaction is created in text. Further illustrating the range of choices available, Davies (1988) presents us with a taxonomy of Subject-Roles at both sentence and discourse levels. In this top-to-bottom taxonomy, Davies shows how writers choose to present themselves along a "continuum of visibility" (p. 180) in their texts. For instance, the taxonomy starts with the most visible, i.e. when the writer presents himself as a *discourse participant*, as in *I think/believe/propose,* and followed by the next degree of writer's visibility, represented in *discourse viewpoint* such as when the writer chooses to use expressions such as *My view/argument...* etc. Other degrees of visibility and invisibility such as *interactive participant*, *real-world participant*, *discourse entity*, *real-world entity* may be selected by writers in presenting their discourse, spoken or written. At the bottom of Davies's Subject-Role Taxonomy, we see the most invisible choices such as *objectivised viewpoints* as in *The reason of this phenomenon is...* or as in *The sad case is,* and last in the taxonomy we see the *invisible subject* as in *There appears to be...* Further discussion and more examples taken from the sample texts of the present study are found in Section 7.4.3.1.2 below.

The question which arises in this context, i.e. as regards (in)visibility of writers in text, is: *does the degree of the visibility and invisibility of the writer in text affect academic writing in terms of 'good' or 'poor'?* The answer to this question may be found in the following quotation from Davies (1988):

> In the representation of the visibility dimension

or continuum... relative visibility is not evaluated as either desirable or undesirable, or as representing good or bad academic writing; rather it is seen as reflecting the competing demands on writers of academic discourse seeking to maintain a delicate balance between, on the one hand, being explicit, and hence 'honest', about their views, and on the other, of ensuring reader focus on the research topic under discussion by avoiding unnecessary self-reference (Davies, 1988: 182).

It is true that a relative use of visibility in a text may not affect its quality as good or bad; however, if frequent Visible Subject-Roles are used in a text, then the text may be viewed as more spoken than written. According to Davies, it is "In casual conversation, and in oral narrative" that typical Discourse or Interactive Participant Themes are selected as Subject-Roles. The selection of such highly visible Subject-Roles in such genres as narrative and conversation may be ascribed to "the face-to-face, here-and-now of the social situation" (Davies, 1988b: 183). Thus, this may make us think of written texts overusing Discourse and Interactive Participants in Theme position to be somewhat conversational, and having characteristics of the spoken mode.

As noted earlier, Gosden (1993 and 1994) follows Davies's Theme analytical framework in the analysis of scientific research articles (RAs) written by NS and NNS writers. In his (1993) study, for instance, Gosden reports on how "scientific research writers structure textual interaction with the external community" (p. 56). So, he selects 36 scientific research articles taken from 12 hard sciences international academic journals published in the UK, the USA and Canada, and examines 4358 sentence-initial elements identified by both marked Themes (CFTs) and unmarked Themes realised by grammatical subjects (GSs) in main clauses. In his analysis, however, Gosden focuses on the unmarked Themes, represented by the GSs functioning as both interactional and topic-based elements in discourse. 67.2% of the sentence-initial Themes analysed were found to be GSs, not preceded by CFs.

In the analysis of both marked and unmarked Themes, Gosden used the same terminology used by Davies, i.e., Contextual Frame Themes (CFTs) and Subject/ Topic Themes (TTs). However, he refines and extends Davies's

(1988b) taxonomy of "Subject-Roles at Sentence and Discourse Level" (pp. 180-182). In his refinement of Davies's taxonomy, Gosden (1993) suggests four main domains, which can be distinguished in the scientific RAs: (i) the Participant domain, in which there may be a *discourse* participant (writer) who may be greatly visible through the use of the first person pronouns *I* and *We*, or an *interactive* participant (a researcher in the field or in the discourse community) such as *Berry (1996)* who may be less visible than the writer of the RA him/herself; (ii) the Discourse domain, where the focus of Theme shifts from *discourse participants* to *discourse entities* such as *Figure 4* and *discourse events or processes* such as *The conclusion*; (iii) the Hypothesised and Objectivised domain, in which the focus shifts to *hypothesised entities* such as *The model* and *objectivised* and *hypothesised viewpoints* such as *One factor* and *The possibility,* respectively; and finally (iv) the Real World domain, in which the Theme becomes a real-world entity, real-world event/process or mental process.

According to Gosden's model, which, as noted above, is based on Davies's (1988b) taxonomy, the more participant domain Themes we have in the text, the more visible the writer becomes and the more interactional the text becomes. On the other hand, the more real-world domain Themes we have in the text, the less visible the writer becomes and the more topic-based the text becomes. The findings of this study revealed the dominance of the GS *real-world* Themes in the hard sciences RAs in general, and in the *experimental* section in particular. At the same time, the findings pointed to a relatively high appearance of Participant Themes in RAs examined, especially in the *introduction* and *discussion* sections. Thus, Gosden's findings point to more frequent topic-based Themes used in the experimental sections of the RAs than in the introduction and discussion sections which tend to have a somewhat high visibility of writers or discourse participants, which may indicate a certain degree of interactionality.

Pushing the boundaries of Theme

Since 1989, Berry has continued her attempts to refine the Theme analytical framework. Her most recent attempt (1996) has been the most "revolutionary" in considering what a Theme is and what a Theme includes. Being a systemic-functional text linguist and text analyst, Berry (1996) has chosen the Hallidayan meaning-based theory to be the basis for the analytical framework of Theme.

The basis of the theory is that a "language is interpreted as a system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which the meanings can be realised. ... This puts the forms of a language in a different perspective: as means to an end, rather than as an end in themselves" (Halliday, 1985/94: xiv). Hence, Berry refers to Halliday and Hasan's (1985/89) theory of *text-context relations*, which was originally based on their (1976) definition of a text as "a passage of discourse which is coherent in these two regards: it is coherent with respect to the context of situation, and therefore consistent in register; and it is coherent with respect to itself, and therefore cohesive" (p.23).

Berry's (1996) work was based on three data collection techniques: (1) three passages taken from the University of Nottingham publications (the *Prospectus, English Studies at Nottingham,* and the *Handbook*) to be analysed thematically; (2) informant judgements provided through interviews with (i) members of the Nottingham University who wrote or shared in writing and producing the passages, and (ii) with students and prospective students who were regarded as "genuine readers" of the passages; (3) and above all, judgements of the Bristol University Writing Research Group, who acted as expert informants.

Additionally, as a text linguist, Berry (1996) has taken the following points into consideration: (i) her investigation of texts is concerned with "the nature of *texts*, not the nature of syntax" (p. 2); (ii) she is also concerned with "the typology of *texts*, not the typology of languages" (p. 2); in other words, she is interested in describing and/or explaining the similarities and differences among texts or text types; (iii) context plays an important role in describing and explaining the nature of texts as well as the similarities and differences among texts or text types. This relates to the text participants, purposes of text and to the settings in which the text occurs; and (iv) informants' intuitions are of a great importance in the evaluation of texts; and whenever possible, producers and receivers of texts or text types are preferred to act as informants.

The above discussion leads us to Berry's concerns with the way writers prioritise meaning, and the ways in which meanings are determined and prioritised. First, it should be noted that in her (1996) study, Berry talks about two types of Theme: ThemeM (Theme considered as meaning) and ThemeF (Theme considered as form or grammar). (We should mention here that she took these two types of Theme, with some modification, from Huddleston's (1991) distinction between ThemeC (Theme considered as content) and ThemeE (Theme considered as expression)).

However, what seems to be more important than labelling is to know how such Themes are determined and prioritised meaningfully in texts. In this respect, Berry distinguishes two types of ThemeMs: discourse or text ThemeM and clause ThemeM. She first focuses on a *discourse* ThemeM and defines it as "something that a speaker or writer has in relation to a text or large section of a text" (p. 13). Conversely a *discourse* ThemeM is determined in a text through speakers' or writers' main concerns, reflected in general types of meaning, which are in turn determined via informants' (writers/producers, genuine readers and 'expert witness' readers) intuitions and judgements.

To summarise what has been said above, Berry's procedure is to draw upon informant judgements, through which the writer-reader relationship in a text is looked at as a social one. "This, it was thought, might be basically a textual relationship, but again it was thought to have interpersonal implications. On this basis, any words and phrases designed to help readers, or to improve the flow of the discourse were considered by some members of the group [of expert witness informants] to be expressing interpersonal meaning" (p.16). Further, interactional or interpersonal meanings were prioritised according to the definition: "*interactional meaning being defined as references to writer(s) or reader(s), or to groups of people which include writer(s) or reader(s)*" (p. 17). According to Berry, there are also other resources for prioritising interpersonal/interactional meanings, based on the concept of social roles: the use of modality such as obligation and prohibition, and the use of "signposting meaning" which shows "how one part of a text fits together with other parts of a text" (p. 18). To summarise, speakers/writers' concerns (discourse ThemeMs) are determined through informants (writers, receiver readers or expert witnesses or readers), and on the basis of these concerns, general types of meaning are determined to be prioritised empirically.

What about the second type of ThemeM: clause ThemeM? How is clause ThemeM determined and prioritised? According to Berry (1996: 19), "The determination of clause ThemeM is based partly on expectations about meaning and partly on expectations about form." This leads us to the consideration and

discussion of formal features or aspects of Theme, "such as position in clause, or postpositional particle" and whether these formal aspects have "any systematic association" with discourse ThemeMs (p. 19). If such a connection was found, Berry argues, then discourse ThemeMs or "discourse priority meanings would confer upon ThemeF a special status as conveyer of important meanings"... which may make readers "interpret *anything* conveyed by ThemeF as a priority meaning" (p. 19). So, whatever ThemeF conveys in a clause would be regarded as *clause* ThemeM.

The question is: *what are the means or ways of prioritising meanings and determining ThemeFs?* With respect to prioritising meanings, Berry lists five means of prioritising: the first is *repetition*, in which the meaning is realised *lexically* by frequency of mention (Fries, 1983), but with the consideration that frequency of mention might be regarded as grammatical if it was, as noted above, associated with a grammatical aspect such as *position*; the second means is *intonation*, in which the topic or meaning is realised *phonologically* (Halliday, 1985); meanings can also be prioritised through three grammatical means taken from (Halliday, 1985): a *special particle* such as the Japanese postposition particle *-wa* (Halliday, 1985); an *unusual position* such as the realisation of *marked themes* (Halliday, 1985); and the last grammatical means of prioritising of prioritising meanings is *fronting*, which is the general realisation of Theme in English (Berry, 1996).

As regards determining ThemeFs which are, as noted above, regarded as clause ThemeMs and thus realise prioritised meanings, Berry (1996) would seem to adopt Halliday's (1985/1994) general hypothesis "that Theme [discourse ThemeM in Berry's terms] is realised by positioning at the beginning of the clause" (p. 21). Within this general framework of identifying ThemeM as the beginning of the clause, she refers to a number of views, which she regards as "sub-hypotheses" (pp. 21-22), put forward by different systemic functional linguists. Based upon these views or sub-hypotheses which were set, tested and investigated empirically by Berry (pp. 22-31), she comes up with "a(nother) personal view of Theme", in which she evaluates extending the boundary of ThemeF (clause ThemeM as noted above) to include the four elements, which are repeated here and elsewhere for convenience of reference: (i) initial constituent other than subject or verb, (ii) subject, (iii) position between subject and verb, and (iv) verb (including both auxiliary and lexical verbs).

To conclude, ThemeFs (grammatical Themes) are used in Berry (1996) to serve meanings, and so they are regarded as clause ThemeMs, realised by grammatical aspects of a clause such as position and fronting. The system of Theme is, therefore, based on meaning; it goes from meaning to form. Meaning choices, as noted above, are realised through formal or grammatical aspects of Theme in a clause. In sum, this analytical framework of Theme reflects the basis of Halliday's functional grammar, and Berry admits that she as well as other text linguists and text analysts owe an enormous debt "to Halliday and to his innovatory approach to text analysis" (Berry, 1996: 1). However, in this paper, although Berry is still working within Halliday's general framework of Theme analysis, she appears to go somewhat further than Halliday in considering the boundary of Theme. Thus, we can see her considering extending her Theme to include the auxiliary and lexical verbs. One may wonder why Berry does this. The reason for her consideration of including all these elements (pre-subject, subject, post-subject pre-verb, and auxiliary and lexical verbs) as part of Theme is her goal of finding an analytical system "which emphasises paradigmatic relations rather than syntagmatic relations in text" (Berry, 1996: 7); thus this type of system would enable a text analyst to reveal meanings in a text through linguistic choices, which are intended to serve speakers/writers' meaning choices. Within such a framework, language is viewed "as a system of choices for making meaning" (Halliday, 1985/94).

Implications for language education

From the above discussion, we can note that the Theme system in Engish Language is responsible for textual meanings, which in turn organize other meanings, ideational and interpersonal, into coherent, comprehensible discourse. Therefore, knowledge of the Theme system may be useful to both language teachers and learners, particularly in literacy instruction. In what follows, we can note the potential of Theme analysis in exploring and revealing how texts develop, and the role of thematic choices in the progression and cohesion of text.

The Potential of Theme analysis in revealing how texts develop

Theme analysis has been used extensively by

systemic functional linguists and researchers of writing as a framework to describe how a text develops (Davies, 1988b). Further, the motivation behind using this analysis is the claim that thematic organisation and thematic choices provide one index of how successful a particular text is (Al- Sharah, 1997; Berry, 1989; Gibson, 1993; Stainton, 1996) and more importantly what communicative roles such parts of clauses, Themes in this context, play (Vande Kopple, 1991).

Al-Sharah (1997), for instance, used a Theme-based analytical framework to examine EFL student written texts and how EFL writers make meanings and produce their texts through the selection or choice of semantic, syntactic and rhetorical aspects of the language. The Theme analysis employed in the study could reveal characteristic features of good and poor texts. The same goal was also expressed in the following question from Eiler's (1986) study on thematic distribution in a lecture-chapter text:

> *"How can we make heuristic generalisations regarding text design that in fact reflect actual writers' choices?" (p. 49)*

In her analysis of the lecture-chapter which is taken from *The Feynman lectures on physics: Mainly mechanic, radiation, and heat*, Eiler (1986) suggests that the analysis of thematic choices and distribution of themes "can reveal heuristic structures defining a genre" (p. 49) and that this, in turn, will reveal the features of a particular text. Her genre-based functional analysis is based mainly on Halliday's concept of Theme as "the point of departure of the message" (1985: 38). Theme analysis can enable "the reader to distinguish a text from a random set of sentences" (Halliday, 1970: 143). In addition, the importance of Theme analysis stems from the potential of thematic choices and thematic organisation to discriminate amongst genres and to identify the characteristic linguistic features of each genre (Al-Sharah, 1997; Berry, 1989 and 1996; Davies, 1988b, and 1997; Fries, 1983, Francis, 1990; Gibson, 1993). Further, the manipulation of thematic choices seems to enable writers "to more clearly indicate relevance to co-text and the contexts of situation and culture and thereby construct more coherent and cohesive texts" (Gosden, 1994:16).

For example, in his (1993) study, Gibson investigates some of the linguistic features that affect the perceived success of an abstract. He starts his investigation by collecting and analysing textual data and then by obtaining informants' judgements and perceptions of the relative success of the abstracts, using sets of questionnaires designed for that purpose. According to Gibson's study of abstracts, one of the most important findings was that his respondents often seemed to be less concerned about what to say in the abstracts, but more concerned about how to say it. Therefore, Gibson holds the view that an investigation of thematic choices is "potentially instructive" (p. 255). He states two reasons for this and the motivation for thematic analysis. The first is pertinent to the qualitative comments offered by his informants or judges regarding the texts under analysis. Gibson's informants' qualitative comments, such as "difficult to scan and absorb" (p. 255) and "... not clear as to salient points of article" are believed to motivate the analysis of thematic choices in the assigned texts. In this context, Gibson supports Martin's (1986) observations "that the skilful arrangement of topical items in first position can aid skim reading and promote easy navigation through the text" (p. 256).

The role of thematic choices in the progression and cohesion of text

Finally, the question that remains is: *what about the role of thematic choices in the progression and cohesion of text?* Wang (2007) holds the view that students' weaknesses in their arguments are due to problems with either thematic progression or thematic selection, or both. In an analysis of thematic progression to reveal cohesion and coherence of text, Li (2009) states that "thematic progression not only organizes the paragraph/essay cohesively, but also satisfies the second demand of the expository essay _ to hold the reader's attention to the text" (p. 65). Fries (1983), on the other hand, discusses three major patterns of Theme-Rheme progression related to the three major modes or genres of written discourse: narrative, exposition, and argumentation. He suggests that in the *narrative mode*, the Theme of a clause is realised or characterised as a sequence in time or place. According to Fries, in *expository writing,* each sentence is supposed to follow logically from what has preceded, and in *argumentative writing* each new successive idea is an expansion of a previous one. In the latter mode of writing, i.e. the *argumentative*, the Theme of a clause is expected to pick up on an idea mentioned or given in the Rheme of the previous clause. Hence, continuity of Theme may be dominant in *argumentative* texts. In such

a genre, a Theme recurs continuously and remains almost the same throughout the whole text, while "the Rhemes undergo subtle changes in order to become Themes" (Francis, 1990: 67).

Further, Berry (1996) points to the role of Theme, realised by the grammatical subject, and argues that "While it is now recognised that not every subject in a text will refer to the discourse topic, one might expect that this grammatical constituent will still bear some responsibility for establishing and maintaining the topic" (p. 50). She adds that informants of her (1996) study "seem to prefer texts in which the subjects sometimes refer to aspects of the discourse topic, but not too often" (p. 50). And in her (1989) study of the 3 children's written texts, Berry reported that the text which had an average or moderate use of subjects referring to the discourse topic or to aspects of the discourse topic was the most highly valued by her. However, the other two texts were valued as less successful than the former. One of these latter texts was criticised and regarded as structurally repetitive due to the frequent use of topic-based subjects, and the other was valued the least highly due to the rare use of subjects related to the discourse topic. However, we should point out in this context that in Berry's (1989) study, although she used informants' judgements, she also relied heavily on her own intuitions in judging which of the four texts was the best. Further, she excluded from her analysis the existential *there* which was used frequently in children's texts, Child C's text in particular, which in her view was rated as the best. She also excluded *imperatives* and *interrogatives* from her analysis.

Nonetheless, thematic progression, which is sometimes equated with topic continuity, across a text is emphasised in research undertaken by Theme analysts. Lowe (1987: 9) states that thematic continuity "is a central consideration in determining which elements gets the sentence initial position." He adds that this position is also supported by Givon (1982: 55) who says that: "We build up stories, chapters or paragraphs by stringing together chains of propositions that (a) comprise the same theme (b) tend to repeat the same participant or topic over a stretch of clauses". Lowe concludes that thematic or topic continuity is regarded as an "unmarked case", while thematic or topic discontinuity is the "marked case". Further, Davies (1988), supported by Gosden (1993), stresses the role of topic continuity in producing coherent discourse. She says:

"Subject is equated with the intuitive notion of "what the clause is about". In discourse, likewise, the repeated occurrence or re-occurrence of the same topical element or a related topical element as Subject is seen not only to specify topic, what a particular stretch is about (which may be more than one 'thing'), but also to be the primary means by which the continuity of coherent discourse is achieved" Davies (1988: 177).

Conclusion

As noted above, this paper aimed to introduce the concept of Theme, its definition, its identification and realisation in a clause, and the different kinds of meaning conveyed in language through Theme. The paper also reviewed how various researchers, working within the systemic functional linguistics, approach and analyse Theme. As noted above, Halliday's approach to Theme analysis still functions as the quintessence of all the different analyses of Theme available in the field of text linguistics. It is the approach which describes a language as functional, where formal or grammatical aspects of a language are used to make meanings. However, the question of identification of Theme and what should be included as part of Theme in a given clause is still controversial amongst systemicists. Halliday, for instance, considers Theme as including everything up to the constituent deriving from the ideational metafunction; and so whatever textual or interpersonal element *precedes* the ideational element is part of Theme. This formal realisation of Theme, which was given by Halliday, has been criticised by some researchers such as Hudson (1986) and Huddleston (1988).

In order to overcome problems raised about identification and what should be included in the Theme, other researchers have come up with different views of Theme analysis. These views aim to develop, and sharpen Halliday's Theme analytical approach. As we have noted above, among the systemicist scholars who succeeded in sharpening and refining Theme analysis are Davies (1988; 1997) who extended Theme to include both a marked Theme (CFT) as an optional element and an unmarked Theme (GS) as an obligatory element, Gosden (1993; 1994) who followed Davies's Theme analysis, refined it and applied it to studying Theme choices in scientific RAs written by NS and NNS writers, and Berry who in her (1989) analysis, like Davies (1988), extended the Theme to include the subject of the main clause, and

in her (1996) study considered the possibility of extending the Theme to include the lexical verb. The paper closes with implications for language teaching: the

potential of Theme analysis in describing how texts develop, and the role of thematic choices in creating progression and cohesion in texts.

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مراجعة نقدية لموضوع التدرج الموضوعي في النص: مضامين تربوية لتعليم اللغة الانجليزية

*نائل الشرعة**

ملخـــص

تقدم هذه الورقة البحثية ملخصاً لواحدٍ من أهم أنظمة اللغة الانجليزية: نظام التدرج الموضوعي في النص، حيث يركز البحث في هذا السياق على مفهوم التدرج الموضوعي في النص والمواقف المختلفة التي يتخذها علماء اللغة الوظيفيون. كما تهتم هذه الورقة بمجموعة من التساؤلات التي أُثيرت حول منهج هاليدي (Halliday) في تحليل التدرج الموضوعي من حيث وظيفته، تعريفه، تحديده، والمعاني التي تتحقق منه في الجملة. كما يقدم هذا البحث بعض التطورات التي طرأت على هذا المنهج التحليلي مثل أطر العمل التحليلية البديلة التي انبثقت عن منهج هاليدي. ويخلص البحث إلى مجموعة من المضامين التربوية لتعليم وتعلم اللغة حول قدرة هذا المنهج التحليلي في الكشف عن كيفية تطور النص ودور التدرج الموضوعي في ترابطه.

الكلمــــات الدالة: التدرج الموضوعي، تعليم اللغة الانجليزية.