THEMATIC AND INFORMATION STRUCTURES OF CLAUSES AND CLAUSE COMPLEXES

Mădălina CERBAN
University of Craiova

***Abstract*:** *As the name suggests, systemic functional grammar is a grammar based on the paradigmatic notion of choice in a certain context. This framework is represented by a construction which comprises semantics (meaning), lexicogrammar (wording) and phonology (sound). Text can be interpreted as a process or product, and in both cases the study is concerned with the manner in which the text derives from the system, and therefore why it means what it means.*

In this article we are not concerned with how a text derives from the system because the subject is too vast, but we take into discussion some structural notations, pointing out some of the options from which the structural functions are derived. A text analysis comprises ten steps, but we are going to analyse only the clauses, and the clause complexes in order to identify their thematic structure. The next step is to compare clauses and information units, and to analyse the latter for identifying their information structure. The text we have chosen represents a casual conversation because we consider that such a text illustrates better the options we are concerned with.

Key words: *lexicogrammatical text interpretation, topical Themes, shared discourse.*

As the name suggests, systemic functional grammar is a grammar based on the paradigmatic notion of choice in a certain context. This framework is represented by a construction which comprises semantics (meaning), lexicogrammar (wording) and phonology (sound). "The organizing concept of each stratum is the paradigmatic ***system***: A system is a set of options with an entry condition, such as that exactly one option must be chosen if the entry condition is satisfied. Options are realized as syntagmatic constructs or ***structures***; a structure is a configuration of functional elements – functions or functions bundles." (HALLIDAY, 2003: 262). The functions depend on the options that exist. The grammar depends on the content. The only possible interpretation that can be given to a structure is between content and expression, namely lexicogrammar and phonology. Text can be interpreted as a process or product, and in both cases the study is concerned with the manner in which the text derives form the system, and therefore why it means what it means.

In this article we are not concerned with how a text derives from the system because the subject is too vast, but we take into discussion some structural notations, pointing out some of the options from which the structural functions are derived.

According to Halliday, there are ten steps which are to follow in order to fulfill the text analysis:

- transcription and analysis of intonation and rhythm;
- analysis into clauses and clause complexes, showing interdependencies and logical-semantic relations;
- analysis of clauses, and clause complexes for thematic structure;
- comparison of clauses and information units, and analysis of the latter for information structure;
- analysis of finite clauses for mood, showing Subject and Finite;

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)

- analysis of all clauses for transitivity, showing process type and participants and circumstantial functions;
- analysis of groups and phrases (verbal group, nominal group, adverbial group, prepositional phrase);
- analysis of grammatical and lexical cohesion;
- identification, rewording and reanalysis of grammatical metaphors;
- description of context of situation, and correlation with features of the text.

The text we have chosen for analysis is taken from spoken language (as we know, the grammar is generally neutral between spoken and written language, but we considered that a text which represents a casual conversation illustrates better the steps of analysis we are going to undertake).

B: Do you think it's worth going to see the Godfather?
C: Yes, [It's worth going to see] the Godfather Two, yes.
B: Darling, Murder on the Orient Express is now at the ABC Shafttesbury Avenue. [It's] on with the Godfather.
A: [It would] be a pretty good double bill, that, actually. We'd be out of the house all night, wouldn't we?
B: But you can't see both of them, can you?
A: Well, if it's the same price, …
B: I mean there are two screens at the ABC Shafttesbury Avenue.
C: Oh sorry, yes, no no no no no you are right. Yes, yes they are…
B: Les enfants du Paradis, what about that?
D: Oh, that's nice.
C: That's a real classic. I do want to see that cos I never saw it ever, even when I was a student. [:m] The Pasolini Arabian Nights apparently[1] are rather fun.
B: Erotic Inferno and Hot acts of Love, I don't think they're quite down our street.
A: That must be in the Tottenham Court Road …
B: They love sex and lusty laughs. What rubbish! [i.e. What rubbish it is!]
A: What is that lovely cinema in Victoria? Have you ever been to it, the Biograph?

(R. QUIRK and J. SVARTVIK, *A Corpus of English Conversation*, Eds. 1980)

In this article we are going to analyse only the clauses, and the clause complexes in order to identify their thematic structure. The next step is to compare clauses and information units, and to analyse the latter for identifying their information structure.

I. Analysis of clauses and clause complexes for thematic structure

According to Halliday, Theme is the speaker's point of departure for the clause. It is realized by the position in the sentence: Theme comes in front position and it is followed by Rheme. Each of the three metafunctional components of the content (ideational, interpersonal and textual) has a contribution to the meaning of the Theme. The textual Theme is a combination between continuative (for example *well*, *oh*),

[1] The Modal Adjunct *apparently* is not an interpersonal Theme here because it does not precede the topical Theme.

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)

conjunctive (for example, *then*, *if*) or relative (fro example *that, which*). The interpersonal Theme has a component of modality (for example *perhaps*), an interrogative mood marker (*Wh-* element or Finite Verbal auxiliary) or Vocative. The Topical Theme is represented by any element functioning in the transitivity structure of the clause. The typical sequence is Textual ^ Interpersonal ^ Topical, meaning that the Theme always ends with a Topical element that expresses some kind of 'representational' meaning. More technically, it is a function from the transitivity structure of a clause and it might be a participant, a circumstance or, occasionally, a process.

Theme			
Textual	Interpersonal	Topical	Markedness of Topical Theme
	Do you think	it	
Unmarked			
		Yes	
Marked			
		It	
Unmarked			
	Darling		
		Murder of The Orient Express	
Unmarked			
		It	
Unmarked			
		It	
Unmarked			
		We	
Unmarked			
But		You	Unmarked
Well, if		it	
Unmarked			
		I	
Unmarked			
		there	
Unmarked			
Oh, sorry,			
yes, no no no no		you	
Unmarked			
Yes, yes		they	
Unmarked			
		Les enfants du Paradis	
Unmarked			
Oh		that	
Unmarked			
		That	
Unmarked			
		I	
Unmarked			

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)

cos		I
	Unmarked	
even when		I
	Unmarked	
		The Pasolini Arabian Nights
	Unmarked	
		Erotic Inferno and Hot Acts of Love
	Marked	
		I
	Unmarked	
		That
	Unmarked	
		They
	Unmarked	
		What rubbish!
	Marked	
	What	What -[1]
	Have	

The unmarked Theme for any clause is determined by the choice of Mood: Subject in declarative sentences, *Wh-* element or Finite element in interrogative sentences and zero in imperative or minor sentences. Semantically, the unmarked Theme is the natural starting point for any particular speech function:

- in a question: the information-seeking (*Wh-*) or polarity-carrying (Finite) element;
  e.g. This is what I want to know.
- in a statement: the Subject
  e.g. This is the man I rely on.

The choice of clause Theme reveals the method of development of the text. In the example above, almost every clause has an unmarked topical Theme. At first the impersonal *it* predominates, followed later by a more specific participant: *I*. Many of the Themes expressed by specific participants (*I* and *you*) are preceded by textual Themes. Thus, the text develops as a discussion of a general topic with particular titles of movies which are brought in for carrying the discussion forward, the whole dialogue being linked logically. On the other hand, at the higher rank of clause complex the logical structure of the argument becomes the dominant motif: here are few marked Themes in independent clauses. The result is that of a shared discourse being developed as a logical generalization without being concerned too much with the rhetoric attitude (We can notice that almost all interpersonal Themes are questions).

Nevertheless, we have to make some observations regarding the interpersonal Themes because there are cases in which more than one analysis is possible. We are referring to the first sentence of the text we have chosen: *Do you think it's worth going to see the Godfather?* One approach would be to analyse it at 'face value'[2] as two

[1] We can not say if *what* is a marked or unmarked Theme because it can be interpreted either as an interpersonal Theme or as a topical Theme

[2] Martin, J.R., Matthiensen, C., Painter, C., *Working with Functional Grammar*, London: Arnold, 1997, pp. 222

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)

clauses, considering *Do* an interpersonal Theme, *you* and *it* (the Subject of the embedded clause) as topical Themes.

Do	you	think	it	is	worth	going	to	see	the	Godfather?
Interpersonal	Topical		Topical							
Theme	Theme		Theme							

A second approach would consist of treating the clause which realizes modality[1] as equivalent to an interpersonal Adjunct initiating the second clause, as a metaphor for a modality element:

Do you think	it	is	worth	going	to	see	the	Godfather?	
Interpersonal	Topical								
Theme	Theme								

Conclusions: Themes of this text (dialogue) have exophoric references to the interlocutors (*I, you, we*) and anaphoric references to the immediately preceding text (*it, they, that*). In addition, there are a number of interpersonal Themes scaffolding the text as interaction (*Darling, what, do, have*) and textual Themes scaffolding the text as repartee (*but, well, oh*). Due to these all types of Themes and their distribution in text we can conclude that the result is a shared discourse which is not particularly interested in the interlocutor's attitude and which does not become more concrete towards the end.

II. Comparison of clauses and information units, and analysis of the latter for information structure

Each information unit is analysed for information structure. The Theme is one of two systems that organize information presented in the clause, the other being that of Information. While Theme uses position within the clause to organize information into an initial orientation followed by the Rheme, the system of Information uses intonation to highlight what is new in the message and it is realized by means of tonic accent.

According to Halliday, a spoken discourse in English consists of a linear succession of tone groups, each characterized by a *tone* from a phonological point of view.

Grammatically, the tone group realizes a unit of information which represents a piece of news. This tone group is made up of a New component optionally accompanied by a component that is Given. Normally, the New comes at the end; but unlike thematic structure, information structure doesn't depend on the order of the New and Given elements, but on the tonic element. The particular word on which the accent falls is called *focus*. Usually, the units after the focus are considered to be Given, and what precedes it can be both New or Given.

Analysis of the New elements will point out that main content of the text. In the text we have chosen the New elements are represented by the enumeration of new

[1] Modality may be expressed by means of an interpersonal Adjunct, such as *probably*, can be constructed as a clause, such as *I think, I remember* or may be expressed by interrogative forms, such as *Do you think?, Do you remember?*

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)

movies, the underlying ideas being the quality of these movies, the place where these movies can be seen, the content of these movies. The Theme in a clause is what is important for the speaker because it explains what the text is about. The New element which is part of an information unit is what is highlighted by the speaker for the listener. "When clause and information unit are mapped on to each other, the result is a wavelike movement from speaker to listener, the diminuendo of the speaker's part being as it were picked up by the crescendo of the listener's part." (HALLIDAY, 2002: 271)

Conclusion: The text we have analysed is typical for the way the sequence of Themes represents the "method of development" of a dialogue, while the sequence of New units represents the main points of the text; both speakers have their own contribution to the structure of the whole text.

The two structures Theme – Rheme and Given – New can interpenetrate, but we have to keep in mind that they are two distinct independent structures, not only one. As a result, they can vary independently allowing all possible combinations of the two kinds of structure.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bloor, Th., Bloor, M., *The Functional Analysis of English. A Hallidayan Approach*, Second edition, Arnold, London, 2004

Eggins, S., *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*, Pinter, London, 1996

Fries, P., *On the Status of Theme in English: Arguments from Discourse* in Forum Linguisticum 6, pp. 1-38, 1981

Halliday, M.A.K. and Martin, J.R., *Writing Science: Literacy and Discoursive Power*, The Falmer Press, London, 1993

Halliday, M.A.K., *Introduction to Functional Linguistics*, Arnold, London, 1994

Halliday, M.A.K. *On Grammar*, eds. Jonathan Webster, Continuum, London & New York, 2003

Ghadessy, M., *Thematic Development in English Texts*, Pinter, London, 1995

Martin, J.R., *English Text: System and Structure*, Benjamins, Amsterdam, 1992

Martin, J.R., Matthienssen, C., Painter, C., *Working with Functional Grammar*, Arnold, London, 1997

Quirk, R. and Svartvik, J., *A Corpus of English Conversation*, Eds. 1980.

BDD-A5707 © 2009 Universitatea din Pitești
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.108 (2026-11-17 21:49:08 UTC)