

THE THEME-TOPIC INTERFACE. EVIDENCE FROM ENGLISH

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The author of *The Theme-Topic Interface* (henceforth TTI) has attempted to achieve a double aim: Firstly, she has tried to unravel the confusion that has proliferated around the terms Theme/Topic ever since they were coined by the linguists of the Prague School. Her second aim has been to analyze the formal aspects and discourse functional motivations of thematic constructions in the *Lancaster/IBM spoken English Corpus* (hereforth LIBMSEC) as well as the frequencies of the thematic structures identified therefrom.

The book contains eight chapters, 43 pages of references, 19 figures, 53 tables, 17 pages of notes; an index by subject and author, as well as one appendix. The contents of TTI are divided into three main parts, each of which will be dealt with successively in this review. A critical summary of the contents, followed by comments on particular aspects will be given.

After the introduction, in which the aim of this study and the nature of the Theme/Topic interface are specified, Part I provides a detailed evaluation of the three dominant interpretations that the communicative categories of Theme and/or Topic have received within linguistic studies: semantic, informational and syntactic. Part II, comprising Chapters 2, 3 and 4, surveys previous studies on the categories under analysis. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4, Gómez-González makes a critical evaluation of the pragmatic categories according to three functionalist

models: The Prague School, Systemic Functional Grammar and Functional Grammar respectively. Finally, in Part III the author presents her own proposal of Syntactic Theme, an alternative and at the same time, conciliatory view of the theoretical perspectives already presented. She also gives an account of the formal expressions and discourse functions of this category in LIBMSEC. The final chapter of this part summarizes both the theoretical and the corpus-based finding of her research and makes interesting suggestions for further investigation in this field.

Semantic, informational and syntactic interpretations of the categories Theme and/or Topic

Part I is a successful evaluation of how the pragmatic functions have been presented in previous functional research. This, in itself, is very meritorious, as the author analyzes the communicative categories under study from a semantic, informational, and syntactic point of view – no easy task, considering that the exact boundaries between these three perspectives are, more often than not, hard to draw and that the general tendency has been to give greater weight to one interpretation at the expense of the others. The three perspectives, often overlapping, lead to some queries which are set out in detail, in an attempt to evaluate the pros and cons of each one and their variants.

The difficulties referred to are dealt with convincingly by the author. The semantic interpretation is presented as the focus on the relation of relevance/aboutness with respect to (1) a clausal predication (relational aboutness), (2) the overall discourse (referential aboutness) and (3) what the speaker and her/his addressee regard as relevant information in discourse (interactive aboutness). The informational interpretation, also called “combining” in previous investigations, identifies Theme/Topic with three different types of Givenness: (1) relational givenness, which is discussed with regards to individual clauses; (2) contextual givenness, in terms of recoverability and predictability, shared knowledge and assumed familiarity, and (3) activated givenness, which represents the information that both the speaker and the addressee have in mind. Finally, the syntactic interpretation, described as fairly homogeneous, is characterized by the association of Theme/Topic with the clause-initial position.

As for the terminological confusion surrounding the concept of Theme/Topic, it seems very appropriate that Gómez-González has made a clear distinction between the categories of Theme, Topic and Given information, in line with the

theories set forth by Hasan and Fries (1997) among others. Although these three concepts may conflate in the same word, there is not always a one-to-one correspondence between them. It is not always possible to establish an automatic relationship between the clause constituent that expresses what an utterance is about, the Topic, and the first constituent that fulfils a transitivity function, the Theme. Theme and Topic are two distinct notions which should be defined from two different perspectives: “the Theme, as a structural category whose main function is to determine the point of departure of the message, by its location in the clause, and the Topic, for its semantic and pragmatic value, as a cognitive category that expresses what the message is about” (Moya and Albentosa, 2001: 351).

The Theme-Topic interface in three Functional approaches.

The second part of this volume embodies a critical overview of the different interpretations of the pragmatic functions within the frameworks of the Prague School, Systemic Functional Grammar and Functional Grammar. It is shown that “the three approaches succumb to inaccuracies aroused by such a merging of interpretations”. In Chapter 3 it is observed that the majority of the “informational trend” linguists of The Prague School identify Theme/Topic with co(n)textually recoverable information. Alternatively, “the syntactic trend” scholars seem to identify Theme with the notions of clausal aboutness and contextual aboutness interchangeably. However, they seem to adopt a separating view, dissociating Theme from Given Information.

In Chapter 4, it is shown that the Hallidayan Theme is simultaneously associated with clause-initial position and “with what the clause is about”. One of the controversial aspects observed within the Systemic Functional Grammar approach is the notion of Topical Theme, which Gómez identifies with the first experiential/interpersonal element of the clause.

Concluding the first part and focusing on Functional Grammar, the author points out in Chapter 5 that, although Theme, Tail and Topic are presented as three different functions within Functional Grammar, they are three different realizations of the same pragmatic function. In contrast to the Systemic Functional Grammar model which approaches Theme from a relational perspective, Theme, Tail and Topic are given a referential-semantic interpretation in Functional Grammar. Theme is presented as an initial predication-external entity that expresses what the following predication is about, whereas Topic is considered a

predication-internal entity about which something is predicated with respect to the overall discourse. It is also suggested that Topic is identified with different interpretations of Givenness (recoverability, shared knowledge, assumed familiarity, activation and mental storage) and a Scale of Topic acceptability is presented, without providing a clear method to identify this pragmatic function. It is concluded that the issues that often provide debate within Functional Grammar are due to the merging of syntactic, semantic and informational criteria in the definition of the pragmatic functions.

This extensive and, perhaps too complex, critical apparatus set out in Parts I and II of TTI is justified in the third part of this volume, where Gómez-González presents her own proposal for Theme, based largely on the theories of Systemic Functional Grammar.

The general impression after reading this part is that the overview of the various accounts to Theme within The Prague School, Systemic Functional Grammar and Functional Grammar is done with great skill. To begin with, Gómez-González shows the limitations of the Prague School in the description of communicative categories. This is mainly because their functional explanations centre on a single level of description, Functional Sentence Perspective, which is, in many cases, concerned with isolated independent clauses, rather than with authentic language, the intended aim of analysis of functional accounts. As a result, a great number of contradictions and discrepancies arise both between the scholars within the informational trend (Weil, Mathesius, Firbas, Dahl, Sgall) and those within the syntactic school (Tránvnick, Benes and Danes).

To mention a few, the differences between Weil, Mathesius and the co-researchers in the generative functional framework, on the one hand, and Firbas and the advocates of Communicative Dynamism, on the other, are more than evident, in spite of the fact that they belong to the same school. In opposition to Mathesius, who admits the existence of themeless clauses, Firbas and his co-researchers assign a thematic structure to all clauses, on the basis of the Communicative Dynamism of their elements.

It is appropriately affirmed that, apart from Firbas, informational linguists do not usually provide contextual evidence to differentiate what should be taken as Given Information from what should be considered as New. In fact, Firbas' thematic organization of the clause is not only determined by the placement of clause constituents. The basic distribution of Communicative Dynamism (theme-transition-rheme) may be altered by both contextual and semantic factors. On the whole, those elements conveying unknown information carry a higher degree of CD than contextually dependent and known constituents.

I will then make reference to the Systemic Functional Grammar approach, specifically to the balanced and rigorous treatment that is given to the Hallidayan concept of Topical Theme. The fact that Gómez-González strengthens the separating view of the theory is another positive point to comment on, as the notions of "point of departure" (theme) and "what a clause is about" (topic) do not always overlap in the same clause element.

Finally, in the chapter dedicated to Functional Grammar, Dik's (1989) categories of New Topic, Given Topic, Subtopic and Resumed Topic are placed along a scale of Topic Acceptability. It is assumed "that utterances are more likely to be about Active referents than about Brand New referents, because the former are already in the forefront of the addressee's consciousness and therefore can be retrieved more easily" (p. 170). It should also be noted that the author successfully sketches the main problems this approach creates, especially with reference to the relationship between Topicality and P1 and P2 placements. Functional Grammar scholars give special treatment to the topical and focal constituents of the clause structure. The general tendency to place the known topical entities in P1 and the new topical constituents in P2 (Dik, 1989: 269) is pointed out. However, as Li and Thompson (1976: 460) state, Topic can only be understood in terms of discourse and extra-sentential considerations.

Gómez-González's proposal of syntactic theme.

In the third part of TTI Gómez-González proposes an alternative approach to Theme. Despite the moot points referred to in previous sections, a moderate functional approach to theme, largely within the Systemic Functional Grammar, is proposed in Chapter 6. The Theme, identified with "the clause initial transitivity/mood slot and profiled as a marker of subjectivity and as a marker of discourse structure with both forward and backward potential, is regarded as a universal category that acts across languages as a special deictic" which helps texts achieve cohesion and coherence. The main differences between this proposal and the three others previously overviewed can be summarized in the following points:

Firstly, the category of syntactic Theme is dissociated from Discourse Topic, i.e., a cognitive, intuitive and non-structural concept which expresses "what a text/discourse is about"; from Point (the message a particular text tries to convey), and from the suprasegmental coding of Givenness and the morphosyntactic and cohesive coding of Recoverable Information.

Secondly, the categories of Metaphorical Theme and Displaced Theme are abandoned and the notion of Textual Theme is replaced by that of Logical or Conjunctive Theme.

Thirdly, bringing together viewpoints from Systemic Functional Grammar and Functional Grammar and even suggestions from the Role and Reference Grammar, Gómez-González offers an alternative interpretation for Special and Multiple Themes. Taking into account that word-order variation is fully determined in Present-Day English by syntactic function, unmarked, non-special Theme Constructions such as "The duke gave my aunt that teapot" are distinguished from marked and special structures such as Cleft Clauses (it was that teapot the duke gave to my aunt), Pseudo-Cleft Clauses (what the duke gave my aunt was that teapot), It-Extrapositions (it is strange that the duke gave my aunt that teapot), There-presentative Constructions (there is a teapot (at home) that the duke gave to my aunt), Inversions (here is the teapot that the duke gave to my aunt), Right Dislocations (the duke gave it to my aunt, that teapot) and Left Dislocations (as for that teapot, the duke gave it to my aunt). Finally, in opposition to Halliday, Gómez-González, states that the category of Multiple Themes includes cases in which a Topical Theme is preceded and/or followed by an Interpersonal Theme and/or a Logical-Conjunctive Theme. As a conclusion to Chapters 6 and 7, an association is established between the use of different types of themes with specific text types and speaker's attitudes and roles.

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Conclusions

At this point an evaluation of the proposal is required. First of all, it should be noted that this theoretical background, replete with parallels and contrasts between one model and the others, leads to a detailed taxonomy of thematic structures in authentic English. This theoretical background provides a basis for a well-thought out proposal of a model which is applied to the corpus selected. The results are relevant and enrich the reader's knowledge of the thematic/topical organization of English spoken texts.

In searching for evidence in authentic texts, Gómez-González proposal is applied to LIMSEC in Chapter 7. 4.097 tokens of syntactic theme are classified with regard to 27 variables by using multivariate tests. As a first result, it is observed that Unmarked Non-special Theme Constructions are the most frequent Themes in Present Day English. Typically realized by a third person pronominal form, acting as agent / subject of a declarative clause and occupying the clause initial predication-internal position (P1), they usually appear after a logical theme and

convey recoverable information which favours thematic progressions with a constant theme and a given before new information patterning.

As regards Marked Themes (preposings and passive clauses), relevant conclusions are also reached: They usually function as prepositional adjuncts expressing condition, place or time in extra-clausal position, and co-occur with Interpersonal Themes, particularly modal adjuncts. These constructions tend to convey focal meaning and to establish a contrast with the information expressed in previous discourse. In opposition to Quirk and Greenbaum (1973), but in agreement with Leech and Svartvik (1975), it is shown that Marked Themes are especially frequent in formal texts such as lectures, magazines, religious broadcasts, commentaries, and fiction poetry.

Only one shortcoming should be commented on in this section. Although the approach adopted by the author is essentially thematic, it would have been relevant to make reference to another of the functional motivations for the use of the passive voice in English. The passive voice is said to be used as a way of avoiding reference to the agent responsible for the action and as a way of keeping an unmarked given-new distribution of information. But another of its main communicative motivations is maintaining Topic Continuity (Givón, 1983). In fact, in many cases, both alternatives, the active and the passive, are equally acceptable from a grammatical point of view. However, from a pragmatic perspective, the passive tends to be preferable to its counterpart as a way of preserving the same subject and the same topic in a stretch of discourse.

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As far as Special-Themes is concerned, it has been statistically proven that the rate of frequency of Existential-There clauses is the highest in LIMSEC. They are followed by It-Extrapositions, Inversions, Cleft constructions, Left detachments, Pseudo-cleft constructions and, finally, Right detachments. The multivariate analyses ratify the special nature of these thematic structures so much so that all of them tend to be marked and placed in extraclausal positions. It is reported that they generally convey subjectivity and that they tend to occur in subjective texts such as fiction, commentaries and dialogues, usually accompanied by Interpersonal Themes, specifically modal adjuncts and finites.

And finally, the author highlights the fact that Multiple Themes usually occur in religious broadcasts, magazines, dialogues and propaganda, following the unmarked pattern: (*Logico-Conjunctive (structural)*) - (*Interpersonal*) - *Topical* - (*Interpersonal*) - (*Logico-Conjunctive*), in opposition to the Hallidayan multiple thematic patterning: (*Textual*) - (*Interpersonal*) - *Topical*. The former is explained through the Principle of Centripetal Organization (Dik, 1989: 342).

The depth with which the model is described and compared with the three approaches analysed makes this volume both invaluable and enlightening to those interested in the thematic/topical organization of English texts. However, the great variety of concepts contrasted, compared and analysed in detail, may cause some difficulties for those who approach Thematicity for the first time. Nevertheless, as a researcher of the topic under analysis, I myself must highlight the fact that the scope of Theme in this volume has not simply been restricted to the systemic-functional perspective. María A. Gómez embarks successfully on a critical analysis of the models which have included as part of their study the categories of Theme, Topic and Focus from a discourse-pragmatic perspective. The theoretical foundations of her proposal are supported by authentic examples taken from natural spoken texts. The relevant and corpus-based results show the frequencies of English thematic constructions as well as a detailed classification of the different types of Themes, their grammatical realizations in the English language and their real communicative functions in discourse.

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