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Talking themes
The thematic structure of talk

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Abstract

This paper examines the thematic structure and progression of an extract of a spontaneous conversation using the inference-boundary model (an amended version of the Hallidayan theme-rheme framework) and the thematic progression framework of Daneš. This paper argues that equal attention should be paid to both thematic and rhematic progression. Insofar as rheme carries the body of the message, it would be tremendously helpful for us to gain an understanding of the patterned behaviour of the rhematic element and how theme and rheme together shape the message in the unfolding discourse. The paper also examines the different patterns of theme-rheme development in the extract. The *boxed*, *gapped*, *holistic*, and *multiple* developments, including their variant forms, are presented and discussed.

About the author

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1. Introduction

The notions of theme and rheme began with the work of Weil who, in 1844, drew attention to an important structural division within the clause:

There is [...] a point of departure, an initial notion which is equally present to him who speaks and to him who hears, which forms, as it were, the ground upon which the two intelligences meet; and another part of discourse which forms the statement (*l'énonciation*), properly so called. This division is found in almost all we say.

(Weil 1844: 29)

The *point of departure* and *enunciation* of the clause are known today by a host of names and are interpreted in diverse ways. The more common labels include *topic* and *comment* (Dahl 1974a, 1974b; Sgall 1974, 1975; Dezsö and Szépe 1974a, 1974b; Bates 1976; Sgall and Hajičová 1977), *topic* and *focus* (Hajičová 1994; Lambrecht 1994; Peregrin 1996; Koktová 1996), and *topic* and *dominance* (Erteschik-Shir 1988).

Theme and *rheme*, on the other hand, are adopted by Halliday (1967a, 1967b, 1968, 1985, 1994), Halliday and Matthiessen (2004), and several linguists of the Prague school, notably Firbas (1975, 1986, 1987, 1992, 1996) and Daneš (1970, 1974, 1989).

Notwithstanding this, there are significant differences in the way theme is understood in the Prague school and Hallidayan approaches. The two approaches, particularly their functional orientation, are compared in Davidse (1987); an excellent summary of the Prague school heritage can also be found in de Beaugrande (1991a, 1991b).

According to Firbas and others, all clausal elements possess varying degrees of communicative dynamism (CD), defined as “the relative extent to which the unit contributes towards the development of the communication within the communicative field” (Firbas 1996: 221). Elements that carry low degrees of CD are labelled theme, regardless of where they are positioned in the clause. Such thematic elements perform the key function of laying the foundation for the discourse to proceed. Halliday, in contrast, regards the theme in English as a position-bound, clause-initial element that is delimited

according to the metafunctional categories of his functional model of grammar (see further Section 2.1). Specifically, “a clause consists of a Theme accompanied by a Rheme; and the structure is expressed by the order – whatever is chosen as the Theme is put first” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 65). It should be noted at this stage that this positional realization of theme is not true of all languages. In Tagalog, for example, the thematic element need not be clause initial and is marked with the adpositions *ang*, *si*, or certain pronoun forms (Martin 1983; see also Rose 2001 on the realisations of theme in different languages). As Halliday and Matthiessen note:

We may assume that in all languages the clause has the character of a message: it has some form of organization whereby it fits in with and contributes to, the flow of discourse. But there are different ways in which this may be achieved ... In some languages ... the theme is announced by means of a particle: in Japanese, for example, there is a special postposition – *na*, which signifies that whatever immediately precedes it is thematic. In other languages, of which English is one, the theme is indicated by position in the clause.
(Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 64)

Hallidayan also departs from Firbas and others by separating the thematic structure of the clause (comprising theme and rheme) from the information structure (comprising *given* and *new* information). Whereas given information is invariably thematic in the Prague school approach, the Hallidayan framework takes the opposite view:

[...] although they are related, Given + New and Theme + Rheme are not the same thing. The Theme is what I, the speaker choose to take as my point of departure. The Given is what you, the listener, already know about or have accessible to you.
(Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 93)

It is for this reason that the Prague school approach has been termed a *combining* approach, as opposed to the *separating* approach of the Hallidayan framework which does not equate theme with given information (Fries 1981: 2).

Beyond the individual clause, studies on the thematic structure of the extended text have come to rely heavily on the models of Daneš (1970, 1974) on *thematic progression* (TP) or Enkvist (1973) on *theme dynamics*. More recently, the *method of development* approach,

which looks at “the way in which a text develops its ideas” (Fries 1995b: 323), has also shed valuable insights on the flow of information in the text (see Fries 1981, 1994, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c; Martin 1992a). In a separate development, Matthiessen (1995: 576) has also shown how method of development is embodied in the rhetorical organisation of the text. Themes are selected, he argues, to guide the decoder through the text by indicating the method of development (as temporal, spatial, general-to-specific, and so on).

Many of these studies, however, are based on the written text (or that written to be spoken) and are centrally concerned with how information is structured across different genres (for example, Taylor 1983; Gómez 1994; Lotfipour-Saedi and Rezai-Tajani 1996). Although less current, discourse-based studies have also been extremely useful in showing how the textual metafunction of language specifically serves as a resource for the creation of meaning. Cloran (1995), for example, argues that the theme-rheme structure of conversations and the cohesive devices employed within aid in establishing various rhetorical activities in text segments. In his research on two television interview programmes, Kies (1988) also draws attention to the variety of distinct communicative functions of fronted-complement marked themes.

This paper continues this less-travelled path and examines the thematic structure of an extract of spontaneous conversation taken from Svartvik and Quirk (1979: 594–615). It uses an amended version of the Hallidayan framework – the *inference-boundary* (IB) model (see Section 2.2) – and Daneš’ TP to explore how language is used spontaneously, rather than how it is expressed as an edited product (of writing and rewriting). More specifically, it seeks to find out:

- (a) The theme types that are dominant in the corpus and what they reveal to us about the nature of spontaneous speech in general; and

(b) The thematic development of the corpus, and how the TP framework could be further refined.

2. Themes and thematic progression

2.1. Defining theme

We begin our discussion with an overview of how theme and rheme are handled in the Hallidayan approach. As remarked, the theme in English is regarded as a position-bound element. The first clausal element that functions as a participant, circumstance, or process is labelled as the *topical* theme. Any other element occurring before the topical theme is analysed as a *textual* or an *interpersonal* theme, depending on whether it performs a linking or subjective function, as shown in Table 1.

<i>Metafunction</i>	<i>Component of Theme</i>
Textual	Continuative Structural (conjunction or wh-relative) Conjunctive (adjunct)
Interpersonal	Vocative Modal (adjunct) Finite (operator) Wh- (interrogative)
Experiential	Topical (participant, circumstance, process)

The diagram shows two arrows originating from the 'Textual' and 'Interpersonal' rows. One arrow points from 'Structural (conjunction or wh-relative)' and the other from 'Wh- (interrogative)'. Both arrows point towards a horizontal bracket located above the 'Topical (participant, circumstance, process)' entry in the 'Experiential' row.

(from Halliday 1994: 54; Halliday & Matthiessen 2004: 79)

Table 1: Textual, interpersonal and topical themes

These labels mirror the Hallidayan division of the major metafunctions of language: (a) the *textual* metafunction, which organises the flow of the discourse, packaging and presenting it as a cohesive whole, (b) the *interpersonal* metafunction, which is concerned with the type of proposition or commodity being exchanged and how speakers position themselves in their messages, and (c) the *experiential* metafunction, which is concerned

with how language construes human experience in terms of participants, processes, and circumstances.

The topical theme, the most important of the three theme types, comprises only one experiential element and ends the thematic segment of the clause. Halliday (1994: 53) argues that until this constituent appears, “the clause still lacks an anchorage in the realm of experience.” The thematic segment therefore extends from the beginning of the clause up to and including the first experiential element. As we see in Table 1 and examples (1–3) below, this experiential element is the first occurrence of any participant, circumstance, or process. The rest of the clause after the topical theme constitutes the rheme.

(1)	In Iowa,
<i>Topical theme</i>
<i>(circumstance of place)</i>	for instance, India-born Democratic candidate Swati Dandekar easily won re-election to her state house seat.
<i>Rheme</i>
(2)	The toxic residue
<i>Topical theme</i>
<i>(participant)</i>	poisons water and kills aquatic life.
<i>Rheme</i>
(3)	Walk
<i>Topical theme</i>
<i>(process)</i>	into Mr Chang’s terrace house in Yio Chu Kang Gardens.
<i>Rheme</i>

The topical theme need not be preceded by textual or interpersonal themes as these are optional elements. If all three themes do appear, however, they typically follow the textual–interpersonal–topical order, as in (4):

(4)	Well
<i>Textual theme</i>
<i>(continuative)</i>	but
<i>Textual theme</i>
<i>(structural)</i>	then
<i>Textual theme</i>
<i>(conjunctive)</i>	surely
<i>Interpersonal theme</i>
<i>(modal)</i>
	Jean
<i>Interpersonal theme</i>
<i>(vocative)</i>		wouldn’t
<i>Interpersonal</i>
<i>(finite)</i>	
	the best idea
<i>Topical theme</i>
<i>(participant)</i>		be to join in
<i>Rheme</i>	

(from Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 81)

2.2. Existentials and the inference-boundary model

A complication arises with the analysis of existential constructions, such as (5) below:

- (5) There is a problem.

Such constructions perform a presentative function (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 257), and carries what is generally regarded as a dummy element *there* in subject position (Quirk and Greenbaum 1990: 429). Unless it is preceded by a circumstantial element, the Hallidayan framework analyses *there* as the topical theme, even though it has no representational function in transitivity (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 257). Martin (1995) argues that although the dummy subject is not assigned any participant function in transitivity, it nevertheless carries ideational meaning:

The fact that it is not assigned a participant function by Halliday ... is beside the point; *there* does realise ideational meaning, helping [to] distinguish existential[s] from other relational clauses (cf. existential *there was a record player in the corner*, attributive *the record player was in the corner, wasn't it?* and identifying *that's the record player in the corner*).

(Martin 1995: 227)

Martin's argument of *there* realising ideational meaning is open to question, but the fact that *there* is analysed as topical theme – despite it *not* being the first participant, circumstance, or process (cf. Table 1) – does go against the established criterion for topical theme identification. As Thompson (2004: 161) points out:

The problem with existential 'there' is that it is Subject ... and therefore ought to be Theme, but in experiential terms it has 'no representational function' ... and therefore does not fulfil the thematic criterion of expressing experiential meaning ... [E]xistential clauses typically take as their starting point the simple fact that some entity exists ... The existence is signalled not just by 'there' but by 'there' plus the existential process (typically realised by the verb 'be'). Thus it seems to make sense to include the process in Theme, and, in addition, this means that the Theme includes experiential content.

(Thompson 2004: 161)

I have, instead, found the approach taken by Fries (1981, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c) and Vande Kopple (1991) more agreeable. They regard *there+be* as well as the participant

construed existentially as theme, rather than *there* alone (cf. Halliday) or *there+be* (cf. Thompson). Support for this comes in the form of the *inference-boundary* (IB) model, recently proposed by Leong (2000a, 2004). The IB model holds that theme serves as a constraining force in the development of the message within the clause; it sets up, as it were, a local context for the decoder to anticipate and interpret the clausal message (Matthiessen 1995: 431). As part of the message structure of the clause, this is the core function of the thematic element. Specifically, the IB model views theme as the text segment that is capable of setting up a boundary of acceptability within which it is permissible for the rheme to occur. That is to say, given an initial element in the English clause, the message within that clause is permitted to proceed in only one or a restricted number of ways in the rhematic portion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Boundary of acceptability

The ellipse in Figure 1 represents the boundary of acceptability. In discourse, and from a cognitive psychological angle, the boundary of acceptability is shaped by two primary factors – context (including co-text) and all relevant activated schemata. The

decoder is likely to reject any development of the theme if it interferes too much with what is to be expected in context and/or what is understood as being permissible in the scheme of events. Not all theme-rheme possibilities are therefore permitted since this may result in a mismatch and, consequently, a bizarre or entirely unacceptable message, as in (6) (assuming normal context; the symbol # indicates unacceptability):

- (6) #The computer table ate the hamburger.

The acceptability of a theme-rheme pair is contextually bound. If (6) now appears in a fairy tale, the decoder will take that into account and make the necessary adjustments to his schemata to accommodate the unusual theme-rheme pairing in the clause.

The relationship between theme and rheme is therefore an intimately close one. As elements that organise the clause as a message, the IB model posits that both theme and rheme must adhere to the *principle of acceptable message development* (AMD principle) (Leong 2000a, 2004). This principle dictates that theme must be acceptably developed by the rhematic portion in the context of the interactive encounter, whether in the spoken or written mode. The AMD principle, that is to say, is that which constrains the development of the message in the rheme. We see in Figure 1 that the thematic element can only be acceptably continued in certain ways but not others.

The AMD principle, in turn, reveals an interesting fact about the English theme. Insofar as the theme is capable of activating a boundary of acceptability, it also carries with it the potential of being *unacceptably* developed by an inappropriate rheme. We seldom, however, see the actualisation of this potential because there is no apparent benefit to the language user to exploit it. The AMD principle turns out to be an extremely useful test for identifying the theme. Using well-formed clauses, the line separating theme and rheme may not be easy to discern. However, since the theme has

the potential of being unacceptably developed, we could approach the problem from another angle and find out what would happen if we were to deliberately flout the AMD principle. Specifically, what would happen if we were to form an anomalous construction (in that the clausal message is a distortion of the generally-accepted world view) by retaining the initial element of the clause? We might discover, at first, that it is not possible for an unacceptable clause to be formed based on the clause-initial element. If so, that element cannot be regarded as being fully thematic since we have not yet been able to locate an unacceptable rheme. What needs to be done, then, is to keep flouting the AMD principle for each succeeding element until we are able to form an unacceptable clause comprising a theme-rheme mismatch. We shall term the thematic element that is fully able to satisfy the flout-AMD procedure as the *thematic head*. All other thematic elements are *thematic non-heads*. This recognises, as does Halliday, that there is an internal structure in the thematic portion of the clause, but it also emphasises the idea of thematic prominence, of some element being more (or less) able than another to satisfy the flout-AMD procedure.

To exemplify the flout-AMD procedure, let us consider a typical declarative (7a), assuming normal context:

(7a) The cat scratched the table badly.

By using *The cat* as the initial element, it is easy to construct an unacceptable clause (again, assuming normal context):

(7b) #The cat barked ferociously.

This element, therefore, is minimally enough for an unacceptable clause to be formed and is functionally the thematic head.

Next, consider (7c):

(7c) Unfortunately, the cat scratched the table badly.

Somewhat mechanically, we might proceed to form (7d) and conclude that the AMD principle is floutable using *Unfortunately* as the minimal element:

(7d) #Unfortunately, the cat barked ferociously.

Examining (7d) carefully, however, we soon realise that it is odd not because *Unfortunately* is unacceptably developed by *the cat barked ferociously*, but because cats do not bark. That is to say, a theme-rheme mismatch is not yet possible using *Fortunately* as the minimal element in the flout-AMD procedure. The flout-AMD procedure is fulfilled only when the following element – *the cat* – is used to create an unacceptable construction, as in, say, (7b).

This example indicates that thematic heads must be sufficiently robust to serve as the peg on which the message is hung. It is submitted that modal and conjunctive adjuncts (see Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 82) do not appear to possess this robustness and have only an indirect influence on the flow of the message proper. Similar comments may also be made of other elements categorised as textual and interpersonal themes in Halliday's framework. Monaghan (1979: 133), in fact, regards such elements as non-cognitive themes since "they only draw attention to the relation of the [clause] as a whole to something else" and "do not prevent a cognitive thematic choice [from] being made in the same clause."

Where robustness is concerned, we are basically interested in how well the candidate for thematic head is integrated within the clause. On a note of caution, this should not be confused with the obligatoriness-optionality distinction since conjunctions and adjuncts are optional elements in clause structure. By integration, rather, I mean that the initial element "is integrated to some extent in clause structure if it is affected by clausal

processes” (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech and Svartvik 1972: 421). There are two ways by which this may be established.

The first involves the use of negated declaratives. Because adjunct thematic heads are intimately connected with the process and provide circumstantial information, they are blocked from appearing initially in clauses where the process is negated:

- (8a) Nervously, Tommy answered the question.
- (8b) *Nervously, Tommy did not answer the question.

An obvious drawback of this criterion, however, is that although it works well with manner adjuncts, it is considerably less effective with other types of circumstantial adjuncts (of time and place):

- (9a) In the morning, the manager called for the usual meeting.
- (9b) In the morning, the manager did not call for the usual meeting.

To counter this problem, we resort to another criterion to separate robust from non-robust thematic elements. Since adjunct thematic heads are integrated in clause structure and are therefore important to the clause-internal message, they provide circumstantial information that is unique to the message concerned. This makes it possible for them to be contrasted with another similar adjunct in alternative negation, as in (10a–b). This, in contrast, is not possible for non-robust adjuncts, as evident in (10c–d):

- (10a) On Tuesday, Tommy did not go to the office, but on Wednesday, he did.
- (10b) As a child, Tommy loved to play in the mud, but as an adult, he detested it.
- (10c) *Frankly, Tommy did not go to the football game, but surprisingly, he did.
- (10d) *However, Tommy did not go to the football game, but moreover he did.

The flout-AMD procedure outlined here offers a way of handling existential constructions. Applying the flout-AMD procedure to our earlier example (5), reproduced below, we discover that the thematic segment comprises not only the subject *There*, but

also the existential verb, and the participant construed existentially. (This, as we recall, is the approach adopted by Fries 1981, 1995a, 1995b, 1995c, and Vande Kopple 1991.)

- (5) There is a problem.

That is to say, there is no one single initial element in (5) that can be mismatched with the rest of the clause. The clause is, in other words, thematic in its entirety – our attention is drawn solely to the existence of *a problem*, and the clause carries no further development beyond this point within the clause (see also Leong 2000b).

The application of the IB model to a sample of other clausal moods is exemplified below (in all cases, normal context is assumed).

- (11a) It was a sin that caused his downfall. (*cleft construction*)
 (11b) #It was a sin that polished the hallway. (*flout-AMD procedure*)
 Thematic element → *It was a sin* (non-head = *It was*; head = *a sin*)
- (12a) It is a sin to commit murder. (*extraposed-subject construction*)
 (12b) #It is a sin to breathe fresh air. (*flout-AMD procedure*)
 Thematic element → *It is a sin* (non-head = *It is*; head = *a sin*)
- (13a) Why did you hit him? (*content interrogative*)
 (13b) #Why did you reach adulthood? (*flout-AMD procedure*)
 Thematic element → *Why* (head = *Why*)
- (14a) Can you help me? (*polar interrogative*)
 (14b) #?Can you dissolve? (*flout-AMD procedure*)
 Thematic element → *Can you* (non-head = *Can*; head = *you*)
- (15a) Be quiet! (*imperative*)
 (15b) #Be young! (*flout-AMD procedure*)
 Thematic element → *Be* (head = *Be*)

As an amended version of the Hallidayan framework, the IB model produces results that are, in large part, identical to those of the former. That is to say, the Hallidayan topical theme corresponds generally to the thematic head of the IB model. In (13–15), for instance, the thematic heads – *Why*, *you*, and *Be* – are analysed in the Hallidayan framework as topical themes. In (11), the thematic element identified by the flout-AMD

procedure (*It was a sin*) also parallels the predicated theme of Halliday and Matthiessen (2004: 95–98).

There are exceptions, as one may expect, since the IB model views theme in a slightly different way. Other than the analysis of existential constructions, which we have already discussed, these include the analysis of extraposed-subject constructions, as in (12). In the Hallidayan framework, such constructions are deemed not to have a predicated theme (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 98); the topical theme, instead, is the anticipatory subject pronoun *it*. By the flout-AMD procedure, however, it can be quite easily shown that neither *it* nor *it+be* is able to enter into a mismatch with the following clausal segment; a mismatch is only possible if the complement – *a sin* in this case – is included as part of the initial segment.

We have seen in Section 2.1 that the Hallidayan framework categorises themes in terms of the textual, interpersonal, and experiential metafunctions of language. Unlike Halliday, however, the emphasis of the IB model is on locating an initial segment that is best able to form a boundary of acceptability and thus constrain the further development of the clausal message. In adopting the IB model (incorporating the flout-AMD procedure) for this study, and to avoid any terminological confusion, I will cease to use the textual, interpersonal, and topical labels of the Hallidayan framework and resort to the more general head and non-head distinction.

2.3. Thematic progression

We proceed now to a general comment of the TP framework. An outgrowth of decades of extensive work on theme-rheme studies, particularly by the Prague circle of linguists on Czech, English and other European languages (see de Beaugrande 1991a, 1991b), the TP framework is a simple, yet elegant way of capturing the development path of the

theme-rheme pair through the text. The schematic representation (TP) was popularised by Daneš in the 1970s. He introduces three broad thematic patterns, illustrated below with appropriate examples (see Daneš 1970, 1974):

(a) *Simple linear theme*

- (16) Abraham begot Isaac,
Isaac begot Jacob,
and Jacob begot Judah and his brothers.

(Holy Bible, Matthew 1:2)

Figure 2: *Simple linear TP*

(b) *Constant theme*

- (17) We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Think gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

(Gwendolyn Brooks, *We Real Cool*)

Figure 3: *Constant TP*

(c) *Derived theme*

- (18) Cruelty has a Human Heart
And Jealousy a Human Face,
Terror, the Human form Divine
And Secrecy, the Human Dress.

(William Blake, *The Divine Image*)

where T_1 , T_2 , and T_3 are themes derived from the hyper-theme

Figure 4: Hyper-theme and derived themes

Daneš' derived theme is taken up further by Martin (1992a: 437) who extends the use of hyper-theme to the level of the text, defining it as “an introductory sentence or group of sentences which is established to predict a particular pattern of interaction among strings, chains and Theme selection in following sentences.” The term *macro-theme* is also introduced as a sentence or group of sentences (usually a paragraph) which predicts a set of hyper-themes. Martin (1992b: 156), in fact, proposes that text-level themes “can be extended indefinitely (to incorporate categories of say super-Theme, ultra-Theme, mega-Theme, etc.) depending on the number of layers of structure in a text.” As this paper is concerned with TP and the types of clause-level themes that are manifested in the text, Martin's idea of text-level themes, while invaluable, will not be pursued further (but see Leong 1999 for a corpus-based study of such text-level themes).

Taking the textual movement of the rhematic element explicitly into consideration, Enkvist (1973) presents a more balanced account of the message structure of the text. He proposes four patterns, of which *rheme iteration* and *rheme regression* relate specifically to the rhematic element. The other two patterns – *thematic progression* and *thematic iteration* – are identical to Daneš' *simple linear* and *constant TP*, respectively. The patterns of rheme iteration and regression are exemplified below:

(a) *Rheme iteration*

(19) John loved Margaret. I also admired her enormously.

(Enkvist 1973: 134)

Figure 5: *Rheme iteration*

(b) *Rheme regression*

(20) Margaret published a book. But no one believed her.

Figure 6: *Rheme regression*

In an interesting study on an audio-taped session of a conference meeting, two other types of TP have been suggested by Dubois (1987). The first, called *gapped development*, occurs when a particular TP is interrupted by an intervening segment. The second, *multiple development*, draws attention to the fact that the theme of a clause can be, and is frequently, multiply developed in the accompanying rheme or successive clauses. Dubois identifies two ways by which multiple development is facilitated – via *separation* [as in (21–23)] or *integration* [as in (24)] (examples taken from Dubois 1987: 95):

Dubois (1987: 109) also reformulates and simplifies Daneš' framework by grouping the patterns into one of two types – *themic* (where the development originates from a previous theme or themes), and *rhemic* (where the development originates from a previous rheme or rhemes). This reformulation, in effect, does away with Daneš' derived theme, which is subsumed under thematic. Despite such refinements by Dubois, there are still, I feel, at least two areas in the TP framework that have not been adequately addressed in the literature. These are raised and discussed in Sections 2.4 and 2.5 below.

2.4. Relating theme and rheme

The first issue involves decisions on the relation, if any, between the thematic structure of one clause and that of another. Let us consider (25):

- (25) The report contained many inaccurate statements. Written in an irresponsible manner, many people were misled into thinking that the financial crisis had bottomed out.

A puzzle is raised about the clausal theme of the second sentence in (27) – *Written in an irresponsible manner*. One cannot be sure if it should be linked only to the theme of the preceding clause (*The report*) or the rheme (*contained many inaccurate statements*). The difference in selecting one or the other option is not marginal since it would result in two very different TP outcomes – constant or simple linear.

We may think of at least two other situations which pose similar problems for decisions of this nature. The first involves pairs of elements which are (collocatively) associated in some way, such as *fork* and *spoon* or, in (26) below, the curling flight of a football as a result of a player's powerful kick:

- (26) The corner kick was taken skillfully, and the curling ball soon found the back of the net.

The question here is whether *The corner kick* and *the curling ball* should be related directly (as constant TP) or indirectly (as derived themes).

The second situation concerns antonymous pairs, such as:

(27) Thin is in, but fat is forever. (*advertisement slogan*)

As in (26), an analyst may choose here to either directly link *Thin* and *fat* together or invoke Daneš' notion of hyper-theme and treat them as derived themes.

While the idea of a hyper-theme may seem helpful in dubious situations such as (26) and (27), it runs counter to our characterisation of the English theme as a concept of initialness (rather than aboutness). In his landmark article, Daneš' (1974) description of hyper-theme renders it as a concept of aboutness (see also Erteschik-Shir's 1988 interpretation of TP). More worryingly, if derived themes are realisations of a hyper-theme, are derived rhemes obtained the same way? Taking this further, is the hyper-rheme a development of the hyper-theme, or a generalisation from various derived rhemes? More crucially, what justification is there for rendering theme one way at the text level (where hyper-themes operate and the principle of aboutness seem to apply) and a different way at the clause level (where the principle of initialness applies)? No easy solutions to these problems appear possible.

2.5. Rhematisation

The second area of concern involves the phenomenon of rhematisation. Daneš comments:

It is obviously not by chance that the studies of FSP predominantly concern the problems of theme (and not those of rheme – of the frequent term 'thematization' and the rarely used term 'rhematization'), in spite of the fact that it is just the rheme that represents the core of the utterance (the message proper) and 'pushes the communication forward' ...

(Daneš 1974: 113)

Somewhat ironically, Daneš' TP is theme-centred and is centrally concerned with the progression of theme rather than rheme (witness, too, the preference for the term *thematic* progression rather than *rhematic* progression). It is only through Enkvist's (1973) work on theme dynamics that the patterns of rheme iteration and rheme regression are given due and specific attention (see Section 2.3). On the whole, however, there is still little interest in the role and significance of the rhematic element in clause- or text-based studies.

An exception to this can be found in the work of Fries (1994, 1995b), where clauses are divided into three sections – *theme*, *N-rheme*, and *other*. The N-rheme, the final constituent of the clause, is “the location of the unmarked placement of New information” (Fries 1995b: 349). The portion mediating between theme and N-rheme is termed *other* and forms part of rheme. As opposed to the basic theme-rheme bipartition, this represents an alternative way of accounting for the message structure of the clause since it gives due consideration to the rhematic element and its tendency to comprise new information. Dubois (1987: 106–107), on her part, also makes mention of rhematisation, but this is given a reinterpretation and equated with Halliday and Matthiessen's (2004: 95–98) notion of predicated theme.

To my mind, text-based studies should give adequate attention to the continuation of *both* theme and rheme rather than be confined to only one or the other element. There is as much to be gained, perhaps even more, in exploring the rhematic thread of discourse as there is the thematic thread. After all, it is the rhematic, not thematic, element that carries the body of the message and pushes the discourse forwards.

3. Analytical guidelines

In light of the above remarks in Section 2, the analysis of the extract is guided by the following two considerations:

(a) *Principal clauses*. Only principal clauses are analysed for theme and rheme (according to the flout-AMD procedure). This follows the recommendation of Fries and Francis (1992: 47) who remark:

... if one chooses to examine only the ‘main’ clauses within a clause complex (i.e. paratactic sequences and primary clauses in hypotactic sequences, with beta clauses forming part of the Rheme), then it becomes easier to discern the method of development and thematic progression of a text.

(Fries and Francis 1992: 47)

The only exception to this guideline is when the subordinate clause, whether finite or non-finite, is fronted in a clause complex, in which case the fronted subordinate clause in its entirety is analysed as a clausal thematic head:

(28) *When he returned home*, the lady greeted him.

(b) *Linking theme-rheme pairs*. In view of the problems raised in Section 2.4, Daneš’ notion of hyper-theme is disregarded in the analysis. Instead, the link between one thematic or rhematic element and another is established along the lines of lexical cohesion (Halliday and Matthiessen 2004: 570–578), namely, *repetition*, *synonymy* (and other semantic relations), *strong collocation*, and so on. Where applicable, both elements of the theme-rheme pair, rather than just one, are linked with other preceding or following elements. As remarked, this would allow one to easily see the development of both the thematic and rhematic elements in the unfolding discourse.

4. Analysis of extract

4.1. General remarks

The extract is taken from Svartvik and Quirk’s (1979: 594–615) *A corpus of English conversation* (the London-Lund corpus). Recorded in 1974, it is a conversation among three friends (in their late twenties) of very different occupations – a male doctor (A), a

male academic (B) and a female teacher (C). Of the three, only B has knowledge of the recording and, therefore, the task of keeping the conversation going (what Svartvik and Quirk 1979: 26 refer to as a non-surreptitious speaker). The exchange – revolving around medical examinations, personal ambition, medical terminology, among others – is dominated by A.

4.2. Thematic elements

A statistical summary of the thematic heads identified in the extract is tabulated in Annex

2. The key figures are reproduced below in Table 2:

<i>Realisation of thematic head</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Pronoun	364	62.9
Wh-word	17	2.9
Process	12	2.1
Miscellaneous	111	19.2
Fronted complement	3	0.5
Fronted subordinate clause	20	3.5
Existential/ <i>it</i> clause	35	6.0
<i>Total</i>	579	100.0

Table 2: Thematic heads in extract

The most noticeable feature of Table 2 is the preponderance of pronouns that are used (the observed differences in the use of the various thematic heads are significant, with $\chi^2=1454.5$). These include not just personal pronouns but also the impersonal *it*, *that* and *this* pronouns. As compared to the miscellaneous category (comprising common nouns and nominalised thematic heads), pronouns are used more than three times as often.

This is perhaps unsurprising since spontaneous conversations tend to take known information (which are frequently pronominalised) and/or the participants themselves as points of departure. In certain parts of the extract where A provides a personal account of his experience during the viva voce, the first-person pronoun is used very frequently.

The pronoun-heavy trend offers some indication that known information tends to be conflated with the thematic head in spontaneous language use. It abides by the natural flow of information first observed by Weil (1844) where what is known tends to be expressed first. In any case, when individuals gather to talk, it is not uncommon for the exchange to be peppered with personal accounts or reports of another person's account. As a multi-party activity, face-to-face interaction also crucially requires the interlocutors to maintain regular contact with each other, and this appears to be most readily facilitated through the use of pronouns or information that is known to all parties. Accepting this, conversations are therefore inherently predisposed towards a given-new sequence of information flow. The heavy use of pronouns in the extract offers some evidence in support of this observation.

As regards thematic non-heads, the analysis reveals a category that is unique to spoken language and has hitherto not been highlighted in theme-rheme studies. This category involves repeated, or echoic, elements, as illustrated in (29–31) below (see Annex 1 on the conventions used):

- (29) B Ø verbal diarrhoea, in fact (laughs)
 A yeah, verbal diarrhoea, well, no, it wasn't really
- (30) A for instance, how much competition can I stand from now on
 B competition, what's that
- (31) A it's looking, percussing
well, it's looking, feeling percussing, auscultation
they're the four things that a doctor
 B auscultation, what's that, oh I see

The second mention of *verbal diarrhoea*, *competition*, and *auscultation* by B in each case performs the function of thematic build-up. They are not thematic heads since they are repeated elements and lack the robustness required of heads. Such echoic elements serve largely a textual function in that they connect a text segment with another (often

immediately preceding) one. For this purpose, they generally occupy the clause-initial position. Similar to other textual connectors, echoic elements provide the frame for the run-up towards the emergence of the thematic head.

In written texts or texts written to be spoken, echoic elements tend not to be found since the development of the message is controlled by a single individual who has the time to plan and organise his thoughts. Although writing is a complex activity involving the juggling of a number of cognitive processes (Flower and Hayes 1981), the writer still has full control over what gets eventually written. In conversations, however, the situation is very different since two or more participants are involved. In some cases, a longer take-off ground is needed, at times involving a corrected thematic head [see (32)]. This is to be expected, since the speaker has considerably less time to organise the message in speech as he would in writing:

- (32) A [dI vaI?] the exams are really divided up into three parts
(Note: [dI vaI?] refers to *the viva*)
- (33) B well, when when I, when I was [3;m], *when I talked about symptoms*,
I'm talking about, yeah
- (34) A you see, to me who's separated those off so well and *it is important in medicine* to separate them, you see, because what the patient complains of

These build-ups, whether in terms of echoic or other peripheral elements (or both), allow the speaker the much-needed time to locate an appropriate departure point for the continuation of the message. In (34), for example, the thematic head (the *it* clausal theme) appears to have been triggered by the word *separated* in the immediately-preceding comment adjunct.

4.3. Thematic progression

The thematic patterns of four selected portions of the extract are given in Annexes 3 to 7.

The text cited on the right margin of each Annex is an abridged version of the actual text (see references in the respective Annexes for the full text). For ease of representation, no running indices are provided for either the thematic or rhematic elements. Ellipsed or truncated rhemes are indicated in parentheses, that is, (R).

In the main, the extract abides by a constant thematic pattern, although there are varying degrees of complexity. Of all the patterns observed, the one in Annex 7 is arguably the most complicated, contrasting sharply with the same in Annex 3. Despite this, however, there is still a feel of constancy that pervades each pattern. In the subsections below, we discuss in turn four thematic patterns detected in the analysis: *boxed*, *gapped*, *holistic* and *multiple* development.

4.3.1. Boxed development

We begin with what I have labelled *boxed development*. This takes place when both elements of a theme-rheme pair are each linked to a corresponding element in the following pair.

This form of development is found in all four portions analysed. The following is taken from Annex 5:

- (35) A and I had not done this well
in fact, I'd done it badly
you know, I mean, I I'd almost, I'd almost been on the pass level of knowledge of vitamin D, you know
(Note: The conversation here is on vitamin D. The *this* and *it* pronouns refer to A's attempt to clarify the source and use of the vitamin.)

Figure 7: Boxed development

We see here the significance of incorporating the development of the rhematic element in the TP account. By omitting the rhematic thread from the diagram, as would a typical analysis focused on the movement of theme, we would not have been able to separate a boxed development from a constant development. We see, in Figure 7, a pattern that is clearly different from a constant TP. In the latter, each successive mention of the same thematic element has a different development. In Brooks' poem [see (17) above], for example, the pronoun *we* is continued by a range of rhemes, none of which are directly associated with each other – *being cool, leaving school, lurking late, thinking gin*, and so on. That is to say, even though there is a common starting point, the point itself is catapulted in several directions. In Figure 7, on the other hand, the effect is very different. Because both elements of the theme-rheme pair are themselves linked to successive elements – thus creating a box-like feel – an anchoring effect is created. Boxed developments, therefore, serve a focusing function in a text; they draw and centre our attention on specific points of interest.

4.3.2. Gapped development

The gapped phenomenon, first mentioned in Dubois (1987), manifests itself in two forms in Annexes 3 to 7. We shall refer to them as *minor* and *major* gaps, described as follows:

(a) *Minor gap*. This occurs when the intervening portion is a simple intrusion which is left undeveloped. In general, minor gaps tend to perform either an interpersonal or modality function. In Annex 3, these minor gaps are realised by the following:

- (36) A and this chap was pretty impressed
- (37) B I can imagine
- (38) A I was quite surprised
- (39) B have some more wine

(b) *Major gap*. As opposed to the minor gap, a major gap represents a situation where the intervening portion is developed and may itself comprise one or a number of minor gaps. In Annex 3, for example, the single instance of a major gap is realised by the following segment:

- (40) A and you get [pl] and you can get honours in medicine surgery, therapeutics or [3;m] obstetrics and gynaecology and my strongest subject really is medicine

The major gapped development is perhaps most visible in Annex 4 where two separate lines of narration can be clearly seen. The account by A about his experience during the viva is temporarily halted by his description of rickets. The major gapped phenomenon takes on a considerably more complex form in Annex 7 where the gapped portions themselves undergo further gapping.

4.3.3. Holistic development

The idea of holistic development was alluded to earlier in this paper when it was remarked that decisions on whether a theme or rheme is linked to another may be difficult at times (see Section 2.4). Consider, for example, the following from Annex 3:

- (41) A [dI val?] the exams are really divided up into three parts one's the written paper

Linkages are complicated by the use of the relational process. In the second clause in (43), *the written paper* is the identifier of one examination part (represented by *one*). This would make it seem as if both the theme and rheme, rather than just the theme, are linked to the rhematic portion of the preceding clause. This form of development, involving both theme and rheme, is labelled *holistic* for this reason. In Annexes 3, 4, and 6, three forms of this development can be detected, as follows:

(a) *Single-to-pair development*, where a theme or rheme is picked up by both elements of a following theme-rheme pair (see Annexes 3 and 4).

Figure 8: *Single-to-pair development*

(b) *Pair-to-single development*, where a theme-rheme pair in its entirety is linked to a single following element (see Annexes 3, 4 and 6; the example below is from Annex 6).

- (42) A I'm third or fourth, you see ...
so that means that four are probably going to become consultants, you know, in
 general surgery or general medicine

Figure 9: *Pair-to-single development*

(c) *Pair-to-pair development*, where a theme-rheme pair is linked holistically to another theme-rheme pair (Annex 4).

- (43) A and then there's a very very rare condition called, called renal rickets,
 extremely rare, probably about twenty, about twenty cases a year in Great Britain,
 something like that, you know, so ...
yeah, it's called renal rickets

Figure 10: *Pair-to-pair development*

4.3.4. Multiple development

The phenomenon of multiple development can be seen in Annexes 5 to 7. As compared to Dubois' (1987) views on this matter, the separating and integrating aspects of this form of development are interpreted as follows:

(a) *Separating*. A separating development may at times involve two threads of development, one corresponding to the thematic element and the other, the rhematic element (Annexes 5 and 6). This development may either start out with an initiating theme-rheme pair (as in Annex 5) or merge to form a stable pair (as in Annex 6). Necessarily, the separate development of both the thematic and rhematic elements cannot take place concurrently. Since one must precede the other, a gapped development results. In Annex 6, for example, the gapped development corresponds to the portion with the personal pronoun *I* as the departure point.

(b) *Integrating*. The integrating development, by and large, follows the observation of Dubois. In Annex 7, for instance, both *symptom* and *sign* are developed under one common thread rather than two. This has the advantage of capturing the exchange among the participants in a more coherent, and therefore integrated, fashion. Further, the text segment in Annex 7 has more to do with the difference between the terms *symptom* and *sign*, rather than on the terms themselves as two separate points of contention. Adopting a separatist type of representation would have complicated the analysis unnecessarily and missed the thrust of the passage entirely.

5. Conclusion

I started this paper by hinting at the need for text-based thematic studies to be balanced in their selection of corpora. While we do have much to learn from the message structure of written texts, we are reminded that the written text is essentially language that is planned, rewritten, and revised. Spoken language, on the other hand, offers us another perspective on how clausal messages are conveyed and structured when language is used spontaneously.

I also argued that inadequate attention has been paid to the phenomenon of rhematisation. I reiterate here that it is not enough for us to know merely how theme is progressed in the text. Insofar as rheme carries the body of the message, it would also be immensely helpful for us to gain an understanding of the development patterns of the rhematic element and how, together with its thematic counterpart, it shapes the textual message and characterises both written and spoken language in general.

The key findings of this study are summarised below:

- (a) Pronouns are used frequently in the extract as thematic heads. It is suggested that this could be due to the nature of face-to-face interactions where speakers tend to pronominalise shared knowledge or details recoverable from context. The character of such exchanges, where effort is regularly made to maintain rapport, may also help to explain the prevalent use of personal pronouns.
- (b) Among the thematic non-heads used, echoic elements are identified as a separate sub-type, serving a mainly textual function.
- (c) In terms of TP, the extract displays instances of boxed, gapped, holistic and multiple developments of the thematic and/or rhematic element(s). Of these, the boxed and holistic developments (and the latter's variant forms) provide an additional means by which the message flow of the text, whether written or spoken, may be characterised. The gapped and multiple developments are an extension of Dubois' (1987) work in this area.

Future studies on the thematic structure of conversations will need to pay special attention to at least two major areas. The first is the size of the corpus. Based on a single extract, and a dated one at that, the conclusions reached in this study are tentative at best. The second is the currency of the corpus. Of necessity, it must reflect language as it is currently used. In view of the changing world and the growing emphasis on information

technology, the nature of talk is likely to be influenced to a considerable degree with the widespread use of the internet, electronic-mail, newsgroups and relay chats. In multi-lingual environments, too, the effects of code-switching, code-mixing and style-shifting pose an interesting challenge in attempting to capture the theme-rheme structure of discourse.

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Conventions

Underlined, bold face	Thematic head
Underlined, bold face, italicised	Clausal theme (including existential clauses)
Underlined	Thematic non-head (including echoic themes)
Ø	Ellipsed thematic head
[...]	Phonetic transcription
[...?...]	Unclear sound
(...)	Extralinguistic activity

Other details

The recording of the extract was made in 1974. The speakers are:

- A Male doctor, aged 29 years
- B Male academic, aged 27 years
- C Female secondary school teacher, aged 27 years

	A	B	C	
First-person pronoun	105	29	1	135
Second-person pronoun	15	18	7	40
Second-person pronoun (impersonal)	25	2	—	27
Third-person pronoun	44	4	1	49
<i>It</i> pronoun	56	10	7	73
<i>That</i> pronoun	25	8	3	36
<i>This</i> pronoun	4	—	—	4
Wh-word	8	7	2	17
Verbal element	7	4	1	12
Miscellaneous category	90	12	9	111
Fronted complement	2	1	0	3
Fronted circumstantial adjunct	15	2	—	17
Fronted subordinate clause	12	5	3	20
Existential clausal theme	21	2	1	24
Clausal theme with empty subject	8	3	—	11
	437	107	35	579

ANNEX 3

(Svartvik and Quirk 1979: 594–595)

I had a very very rare condition

I had a paediatric, a kiddy, a kiddy thing

there are twenty of these a year, of the problem I had

I happened to have read about it about a year ago

I knew quite a lot about it

it's not the sort of thing

I'd seen one patient on a ward with it

I thought

"I'll read about that"

I read about it

I knew quite a lot about it, you see

this chap was pretty impressed

I was pretty well in

you can get honours in medicine ... gynaecology

my strongest subject really is medicine

I had lots of short cases you have to make a diagnosis

that didn't go too badly either

I knew when the viva came cos we all get vivas

everybody gets vivas

the exams are really divided up into three parts

one's the written paper

two is the clinical bit

three is the viva

you get about a third of the marks on each

viva's quite important

Ø only three papers altogether then

Ø five, two papers in medicine, one ... obstetrics

there are five

all of them have a multiple choice

there are five plus multiple choice

it covers quite a lot of ground actually

T-R I can imagine
very general, the questions, extremely general

T-R I was quite surprised

T-R have some more wine

(Svartvik and Quirk 1979: 596–597)

(Svartvik and Quirk 1979: 599)

medicine's very competitive

in that field, the hardest thing is to get in

out of about every five that start off ... consultant

that's sifted down ... general surgery

you're getting down to

you're getting down to the top of a pyramid

in general medicine or general surgery, ... consultant

I have to realistically assess where am I

I'm third or fourth

if one of those chaps who was in my year

that means that four are going to become consultants

I'm third or fourth

there are people, fifth and sixth, not far behind me

the first six or so are a way above the others

the ones that are going to join are the first ten or so

the first six are going to get a look in

the first four are actually going to make it

the first four are really stick at it for four or five years

we don't use the same in medicine

a symptom is something the patient complains of

the sign is something the doctor elicits

he's coming to complain about a bolus on his neck

what you're meaning Joey is what caused the bolus

when you say symptom

the symptom is a manifestation of ... wrong

we use the term sign

sign, symptom

it's very strange

you've got on to a bit of medical terminology

to get symptom and sign mixed up, you've failed

Joey, you're not a doctor

do you see what I mean

what is a symptom

a symptom's something the patient complains of

the sign is something the doctor elicits

do you see

do you see

do you see

I know that to you, that doesn't seem

the difference is marginal

it is marginal to me

it's really fundamental to me

that's a sociological distinction

I'm talking about a medical distinction

it's rather the same

I can't think

I know we've talked about some linguistics before

you've mentioned things

it's really offended you when I've said something

nothing would offend me

it offend

it offends one's system of thought

in my system of thought

it's coming out of my ears, symptom and sign

we write down symptoms, signs

they're so different