How speakers organise their message:
Exploring textual meanings

Introducing ...
- The textual function

Discussing ...
- Implications for language teaching
Language has a textual function: so it has textual meanings. We use it to organise our experiential and interpersonal meanings into a linear and coherent whole.

To organise any text into a coherent whole, writers and speakers need to keep their readers and listeners well informed about where they are and where they are going. Fortunately there are grammatical resources to signpost the way through clauses, clause complexes and paragraphs, from the beginning to the end of a text. The first signpost must be at the beginning of a text, paragraph or clause: it tells readers and listeners what the speaker or writer has in mind as a starting point. The signposts realise our textual meanings.

The four clauses analysed below are each signposted differently although they have the same experiential meaning. You will notice that in all four clauses the lion is Actor; the unicorn is Goal; and the Circumstance gives the same spatial information wherever it occurs. The interpersonal meanings of clauses 1 and 2 are the same; as are the interpersonal meanings of 3 and 4 - in the first two clauses, the lion is Subject as well as Actor while in the second two the unicorn is Subject as well as Goal. But each of the clauses is arranged in a different order.

1. The lion beat the unicorn all round the town
   - experiential
   - interpersonal declarative mood give information
   - Mood Block Residue
   - Actor | Process: material | Goal | Circumstance

2. All round the town the lion beat the unicorn
   - experiential
   - interpersonal declarative mood give information
   - Mood Block Residue
   - Circumstance | Actor | Process: material | Goal

3. By the lion the unicorn was beaten all round the town
   - experiential
   - interpersonal declarative mood give information
   - Residue
   - Agent | Goal | Process: material | Circumstance

4. The unicorn was beaten all round the town by the lion
   - experiential
   - interpersonal declarative mood give information
   - Residue
   - Goal | Process: material | Circumstance | Actor/Agent

Notice that in each clause the speaker has made different choices about how the first position in the clause should be filled. Because we know that all choices are meaningful, we need to ask what has motivated the change, so let us examine each one:

1. The lion beat the unicorn all round the town
2. All round the town the lion beat the unicorn
3. By the lion the unicorn was beaten all round the town
4. The unicorn was beaten all round the town by the lion

The change in linear order changes our perspective about the concerns of the clause. As speakers of English, we interpret clause 1 as a message about the lion, clause 4 as a message about the unicorn. On the other hand, clause 2 is more likely to be part of a conversation about where various actions took place, and clause 3 is about the agency of the action. At this point you may also be wondering about the function of final elements in each clause. We will return to this at the end of the chapter.

Metalanguage for discussing the first element(s) in a clause

What comes first in a clause expresses an important and separate kind of meaning. English speakers and writers use the first position in the clause to signal to their audience what the message is about. In English the first position in a clause contains textual meanings because it signposts the development of a text. To analyse and discuss textual meanings we need a simple and distinct metalanguage: we call the first element THEME and the rest of the clause RHEME.
In An introduction to functional grammar (1994: 38), Halliday characterises Theme as 'what the message is concerned with: the point of departure for what the speaker is going to say'. In other words, it functions as a starting point or signpost, that is, the frame the speaker has chosen for the message. Returning to our four clauses, we can apply Theme and Rheme categories to each one:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The lion</td>
<td>beat the unicorn all round the town</td>
</tr>
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<td>All round the town</td>
<td>the lion beat the unicorn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>By the lion</td>
<td>the unicorn was beaten all round the town</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The unicorn</td>
<td>was beaten all round the town by the lion</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Identifying Theme**

**Topical Theme**

Because the Theme is the starting point from which experiences are unfolded in a clause, it must include the whole of the first item in the experiential meanings. This means that the division between Theme and Rheme in a Finite clause always comes at the end of the first group or phrase relevant to the experiential function and meaning, whether this first element is Participant, Process or Circumstance. Because it is the place (Greek topos) where the experiences in the clause begin, this first element is known as the TOPICAL THEME.

It is, of course, the whole nominal group, verbal group, adverbial group or prepositional phrase filling the first Participant, Process or Circumstance slot that functions as topical Theme. When the Theme slot is filled by a nominal group, the Theme includes all premodification, postmodification, and even all group complexing. All of the nominal group is included in Theme in these examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The man in the moon</td>
<td>came down too soon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lion and the unicorn</td>
<td>were fighting for the crown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The man who came to dinner</td>
<td>stayed for breakfast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Little Brown Betty</td>
<td>lived at the Golden Can</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin and Bobbin, two great Belly'd men</td>
<td>ate more Victuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Three wise men of Gotham</td>
<td>went to sea in a bowl</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A SIMPLE THEME, like those in the examples above, contains only an experiential or topical element. But in some clauses the topical Theme may be prefaced by interpersonal and/or textual elements. The Theme can then be subdivided into textual, interpersonal and topical elements and the clause is said to have MULTIPLE THEMES. If the topical Theme is the only Theme in a clause, there is no real need to label it as anything more than Theme.

**Textual Theme**

Quite often we preface our experiential meanings with a group or phrase whose function is to connect our message to the previous text. When we do this, we create a cohesive text with well-signposted connections between messages. Conjunctions are most likely to occur at the beginning of clauses and when they do they must be considered thematic. Even so, they do not fulfil the primary requirement of Theme which is to signal the point of departure for the experiences in the clause. We refer to these text-creating meanings as TEXTUAL THEMES in order to distinguish them from the experiential meanings in the topical Theme. Each of the following clauses begins with a textual Theme which connects its experiential meanings to the meanings of neighbouring clauses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>But</td>
<td>the pig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nevertheless</td>
<td>the alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And</td>
<td>Jill</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When</td>
<td>the prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And so</td>
<td>the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<td>the prince</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>And so</td>
<td>the teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quite often, the first element in the experiences encoded in a clause is a Circumstance. In this case, whether the Circumstance slot is filled by an adverbial group or a prepositional phrase, the topical Theme again includes all premodification, postmodification and group complexing. The whole of the circumstance element is included in Theme in the following examples:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>On the first day of Christmas</td>
<td>my true love sent to me a partridge in a pear tree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On Sunday morning</td>
<td>my love will come in</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In a cottage in Fife</td>
<td>lived a man and his wife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merrily, merrily</td>
<td>shall I live now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Stow-n-the-Wold</td>
<td>the wind blows cold</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In marble halls as white as milk</td>
<td>a golden apple doth appear</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is often possible to tell something about the purpose of a text by examining its textual Themes. In a simple narrative, such as 'The day I was lost' (Text 1) the main textual Themes are often and and then. In other text types, however, the textual Themes are likely to come from a different set of connecting words. In discussion text, for example, conjunctions such as if, although, unless, because, and in order to are likely
to introduce dependent clauses which enhance the argument. Other Conjunctive Adjuncts such as therefore, nevertheless, in addition, finally, and in conclusion may also be thematic if they are used at the beginning of a clause to signpost the development of the discussion. In the two following texts, the textual Themes are underlined. Notice how, even taken alone, the textual Themes are signposts to the purpose of the text.

Text 1: The day I was lost

(1) I went over to my friend's house (2) and I said (3) 'We'll go for a walk'. (4) And we went far away (5) and I said (6) 'I don't know our way home'. (7) And we kept on walking (8) and we were hungry. (9) And we saw a village (10) and we went (11) to talk to them (12) and we said (13) 'We are hungry'. (14) And they gave us some food (15) and we thanked them (16) and we went walking off. (17) And then we stopped (18) and sat down. (19) And then we saw a giant (20) and I screamed (21) 'Cooee'.

Text 2: Iain's text

A good parallel in terms of qualitative research is the written survey method which poses questions and has a selection of answers from which to choose. Although problems can obviously arise when the respondent cannot identify an adequate response from the selection, face-to-face informants will be able to respond in a way that is appropriate for them. However, it is the depth-interview methodology that has been most criticised for its lack of reliability and validity.

Interpersonal Theme

There are also times when we begin clauses with interpersonal meanings indicating the kind of interaction between speakers or the positions which they are taking. At these times, we are using INTERPERSONAL THEMES. The most common interpersonal Theme is the Finite in interrogative clauses where it precedes the Subject and immediately signals that the speaker is demanding information. Other interpersonal Themes include initial Vocatives, and Mood and Comment Adjuncts. Once again, we do not consider the thematic potential of an English clause to be exhausted until we have reached the end of the topical Theme, so we look for the first experiential meaning before marking the division into Theme and Rheme.

The following examples have an interpersonal Theme combined with a topical Theme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer,</td>
<td>come</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Could</td>
<td>the team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probably</td>
<td>they</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that a distinction can be drawn between textual and interpersonal Themes that come at the beginning of clauses simply because the English language places them in that position, and those where speakers and writers exercise a valid choice. Textually, we are constrained to put conjunctions at the beginning of English clauses but have more freedom about the placement of Conjunctive Adjuncts such as nevertheless, however, or in addition.

Similar distinctions can be drawn with interpersonal Themes. Here the Finite-Subject order of interrogatives is set by the pattern of English clauses but speakers may exercise discretion about the placement of Vocatives and Mood and Comment Adjuncts such as probably, sometimes, thankfully and apparently. The WH-element at the beginning of a non-polar interrogative can also be considered an interpersonal Theme over whose placement we have little control. Unlike the Finite, this element also plays an important part in experiential meanings.

The notion of markedness and its application to Theme: Typical Themes for different mood types

When linguists say that some state of affairs is UNMARKED, they mean it is the most expected, common and unremarkable case. Conversely, when they say that something is MARKED, they mean that it is unusual and should be noticed because of the way it stands out. Applying this concept to Theme, we can separate the typical and expected patterns from the atypical and unexpected. Because all choices are meaningful, when we find marked Themes we look for the purpose behind the speaker's patterning. The purpose may be to draw the addressee's attention to a particular group or phrase but more often it is to build a coherent text that is easy to follow. Because of the influence of Mood on the choice of Theme, our exploration of marked and unmarked Themes should look at each kind of interaction separately.

Giving information in declarative mood

The unmarked Theme for this mood has Actor (or Sayer, Behaver, Senser, Carrier or Identified), Subject and Theme all mapped onto the same nominal group. For example:
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The little dog laughed

experiential interpersonal textual

Actor/Behaver Subject Theme

Where the Goal, Subject and Theme are mapped onto the same nominal group, the Theme is said to be more marked:

The pig was eaten

experiential interpersonal textual

Goal Subject Theme

Where the first group or phrase is Circumstance, the Theme is said to be even more marked and we look for the speaker's purpose for this choice:

Up street and down street each window's made of glass

experiential interpersonal textual

Circumstance Adjunct Theme (marked) Subject

Where the first group is Complement, the Theme is extremely marked, and once again we look for the reason for the choice.

Happy is the bride [as the sun shines on]

experiential interpersonal textual

Attribute Complement Theme (marked)

Demanding information in interrogative mood

Where the speaker requires a yes/no answer in a polar interrogative, an unmarked Theme combines an interpersonal element (the Finite) with an experiential element and follows the pattern above where Actor, Subject and topical Theme are all mapped on to the same nominal group:

Are you going to Scarborough Fair?

experiential interpersonal textual

Finite interpersonal Theme Actor Subject topical Theme

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Where the speaker requires specific information in a WH-interrogative, the WH-word is the unmarked Theme and fuses interpersonal and experiential meanings:

Who goes there?

experiential interpersonal textual

Actor Subject interpersonal topical Theme

Where the Circumstance precedes the Finite or the WH-word as the first element in the clause, it takes up the full thematic potential and displaces the Finite or WH-word as theme:

In the spring shall we go shearing?

experiential interpersonal textual

Circumstance Finite Actor Subject

Demanding goods and services in imperative mood

In this mood, the first position in the clause is most commonly filled by the process, so Process and Predicator as Theme is the unmarked pattern:

Put the kettle on!

experiential interpersonal textual

Process: material Predicator Theme

Any variation from this pattern is more marked, with Circumstance as Theme the most marked:

You tidy your room!

experiential interpersonal textual

Actor Subject Theme (marked)

In every mood there is a cline in markedness from unmarked to most marked rather than any clear cut division.
Extending the notion of Theme to clause complex, paragraph and text

At the level of clause complex the first clause can also be regarded as thematic. In the following example the entire first clause can be regarded as Theme for the second:

When she got there the cupboard was bare

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When she got there</td>
<td>the cupboard was bare</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each paragraph may also be said to have a Theme: the first clause or the first clause complex signals what the paragraph is concerned with, the writer's point of departure for what will come next. This part of the paragraph is often called the topic sentence. Texts also have a point of departure – the first paragraph generally frames the rest of the text and introduces the main thrust of what is to follow.

Thematic progression

If the Theme is the signpost for a speaker or writer's point of departure, then each Rheme is the temporary destination. Usually the bit of the message that the writer or speaker considers interesting or important comes in the Rheme. While the first clause or clause complex in a text will probably contain all new meanings, the thematic choices for the following clauses should not be unexpected. They should be connected with ideas that we have already met in the Theme or Rheme of a clause not too far before.

Because readers and addressees need to be reassured that they are following the development of the text, many texts are signposted by placing elements from the Rheme of one clause into the Theme of the next, or by repeating meanings from the Theme of one clause in the Theme of subsequent clauses. The following examples demonstrate different styles of thematic progression.

Text 3: Cherie's text (first encountered in Chapter 5)

1. A good teacher needs to be understanding to all children
2. He or she must also be fair and reasonable
3. The teacher must work at a sensible pace and not one thing after another
4. The teacher also needs to speak with a clear voice
5. So the children can understand
6. If the children have worked hard during the week
7. There should be some fun activities
8. That's what I think a good teacher should be like

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A good teacher needs to be understanding to all children</td>
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</tr>
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<td>If the children have worked hard during the week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be some fun activities</td>
<td>That's what I think a good teacher should be like</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Cherie's text, a good teacher and the teacher are the predominant Themes, appearing in clauses 1, 2, 3 and 4. All children, which first appears in the Rheme of clause 1, becomes Theme in clauses 5 and 6. That, the Theme of clause 8, refers to the whole of the previous text. This thematic progression is illustrated in Figure 6.1. The only Theme which is at all unexpected is the existential there in clause 7, which breaks the well signposted progression of the text. Figure 6.1 shows how we could draw the patterns of thematic progression in Cherie's text.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Rheme 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Rheme 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Rheme 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4</td>
<td>Rheme 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 5</td>
<td>Rheme 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 6</td>
<td>Rheme 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 7</td>
<td>Rheme 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 8</td>
<td>Rheme 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.1: Thematic progression in Text 3

Similar patterns of thematic progression occur in Texts 4 and 5, both from An introduction to phonology (Clark and Yallop: 1995).

Text 4

1. Phonetics and phonology are concerned with speech – with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech.
2. Talking and listening to each other are so much part of human life
3. That they often seem unremarkable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Phonetics and phonology are concerned with speech – with the ways in which humans produce and hear speech.</td>
<td>Talking and listening to each other are so much part of human life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That they often seem unremarkable.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In Text 4, humans produce and hear speech in the Rheme of clause 1 becomes talking and listening to each other in the Theme of clause 2 and they in the Theme of clause 3. The patterns of thematic progression in Text 4 are represented in Figure 6.2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Rheme 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Rheme 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Rheme 3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.2: Thematic progression in Text 4
Text 5

1 It is possible to distinguish three auditory dimensions or parameters of phonation: loudness, pitch, and a quality of sound that is sometimes called 'timbre'.

2 Perceived loudness is related to subglottal pressure.

3 Pitch is the perceptual correlate of the frequency of vibration of the vocal folds.

4 The frequency is determined by subglottal pressure and by laryngeal adjustments governing the length, tension and mass of the vocal folds themselves.

In this text, three elements of phonation—loudness, pitch and timbre—are introduced in the Rheme of clause 1. The first of these (loudness) becomes Theme in clause 2, and the second (pitch) becomes Theme in clause 3. Frequency, part of the Rheme in clause 3, becomes Theme in clause 4. When the writers have finished the discussion of frequency, we should not be surprised to find timbre in thematic position—the path through a technical discussion has been well signposted. The patterns of thematic progression in Text 5 are represented in Figure 6.3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Rheme</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>Rheme 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Rheme 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 3</td>
<td>Rheme 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theme 4</td>
<td>Rheme 4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.3: Thematic progression in Text 5

Thematic drift

A full grammatical analysis of any text allows us to comment on the meanings the speaker/writer has accumulated. After we have divided any text into clauses and set out our analysis of transitivity, Mood and Theme, we should be able to notice these accumulated meanings emerging as overall patterns in the text.

Text 6 is a procedure, although in the last sentence the writer has broken away from the conventional structure and included her own opinion. Text 7, a letter from a school camp, can be seen as a kind of recount even though the writer includes future events as he counts through his week's activities. In these two texts, the textual Themes have been set in italics and the topical Themes are underlined.

Text 6: Procedural text

**Mango salad**

Peel the mango and cut into 1cm cubes. In the bowl from which you will serve the salad, lightly beat the yoghurt until creamy. Add the chilli, salt and sugar. Put the mango on top of the yoghurt. Heat the oil in a little pan, and when hot put in the mustard seeds. They will start popping within seconds. Immediately put in the dried red chilli. As it darkens, add the chopped shallots. Stir and fry until the shallots are just browned. Pour quickly over the bowl of mango and yoghurt. I don't mix the salad together as it looks beautiful as is—the red chilli and black mustard seeds glisten on top of the luscious golden mango, which is in turn set off by the creamy yoghurt below.

Text 6 varies in its choice of Theme for the different clauses. Predictably, many begin with the Process; that is, the writer presents the next action as the point of departure. Some messages, however, foreground the Circumstance. Then, after all the instructions have been presented, we find the expert presenting her own angle on the task. We could summarise the Themes in the Mango Salad text like this.

| Textual Themes: | and, and, and, until, as, as |
| Topical Themes: | Process: Peel, cut, add, place, heat, stir, fry, pour |
| | Circumstance: In the bowl from which you will serve the salad, when hot, immediately, As it darkens, until the shallot |
| | Participant: They, I, it, the red chilli and black mustard seeds, which |

Text 7: Recount text

**Dear M & D,**

Tomorrow's an early rise because we failed our last inspection so tomorrow morning we have to get up at 6am to prepare the unit for 6am inspection. Yesterday was the Combined School Sports—fun to be in. I ran about 2.13, which wasn't too bad as it was my second race for the season. Today we walk up Mt Stirling. Then tomorrow we have 10 hours of orienteering. What fun! I'd better get some sleep.

love you both,

We can summarise the Themes in the school letter like this:

| Textual Themes: | because, so, as, then |
| Topical Themes: | Circumstance: tomorrow, tomorrow morning, yesterday, today, tomorrow |
| Participant: | we, I, which, it, I |
From this examination of thematic choices, we can see that the writer is concerned with time and with himself as Actor, both singularly and as part of a group. His textual Themes show concern with providing reasons for his actions.

There is a template in Appendix F to help you summarise your analysis of Theme.

**Other textual meanings**

This book is largely about analysing clauses into experiential, interpersonal and textual meanings. Eventually we put these meanings together so that we can talk about a text as a whole — its overall patterns of experiential meanings, overall patterns of interaction and opinion, and overall patterns of thematic drift and thematic progression. We can go on to investigate the relation between the lexicogrammar, meanings, context, and structure, and these are the focus of Chapters 8 and 9. However, it’s worth noting here that there are other textual resources which are not limited to individual clauses. One relates to the text as a whole (cohesion) and the other to its division into information units (the organisation into Given and New information).

**Given and New information**

A parallel textual system to Theme/Rheme is the organisation into Given and New information. Speakers divide their texts into information units, each of which peaks with a change of pitch, or loudness, signalling what they think is the point of their message, that is, its NEW and exciting bit of information. Any other information in the unit is GIVEN. There is no necessary one-to-one relationship between a clause and an information unit, and speakers may foreground any element in a clause as New information. Nevertheless, the unmarked pattern is that Given information is included in the Theme of a clause and New information somewhere in the Rheme.

Speakers and writers choose their Themes and their New information to guide their audience effectively through their texts. This choice influences the organisation of experiential and interpersonal meanings. One reason for passive clauses is thematic selection; another is to put the Actor as New information. We can see the patterns emerging in these lines from the nursery rhyme *The farmer in the dell*. We’ll give the main narrative clauses in the rhyme and analyse just one clause.

**Text 8: The farmer in the dell**

1. The farmer takes a wife
2. The wife takes a child
3. The child takes a nurse
4. The nurse takes a dog

**Analysis of clause 5**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Actor</th>
<th>Process: material</th>
<th>Goal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The dog</td>
<td>takes</td>
<td>a cat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Cohesion**

COHESION deals with devices that give a text texture. While it may appear that linguists have appropriated ‘texture’ from the field of textiles along with terms like ‘ties’, ‘close knit’, and ‘weaving’, in fact, ‘text’, ‘texture’, and ‘textile’ all come from the same Latin root meaning ‘that which is woven’, so it is entirely appropriate for linguists to talk about meanings being woven together and about lexical and grammatical ties between clauses as cohesive devices. Cohesive devices include the lexical devices of repetition, semantic relations, equivalence and semblance and the grammatical devices of reference, substitution and ellipsis (see pages 165 ff). Thematic progression from Theme to Rheme or from Theme to Theme is a structural expression of cohesion.

You can read more about cohesion and information units in Halliday (1994: Chapters 8 and 9) and Halliday and Hasan (1985).

It’s possible to make a simple but effective diagram of the ties between clauses by listing elements with the same referent in columns or chains. Text 9, from Lewis Carroll’s *Through the looking-glass*, is shown first as a block, then divided into clauses with different cohesive devices listed immediately after, then set out in lexical chains.

**Text 9**

So Alice got up and walked about — rather stiffly at first, as she was afraid that the crown might come off; but she comforted herself with the thought that there was no-one to see her. ‘And if I really am a Queen,’ she said as she sat down again, ‘I shall be able to manage it quite well in time.’
Text in clauses
1 So Alice got up
2 and (she) walked about - rather stiffly at first
3 as she was afraid [3.1 that the crown might come off]
4 But she comforted herself with the thought [3.1 that there was no-one
   [5.1.1 to see her]]
5 'And << 6, 7, 8 >> I shall be able to manage it quite well in time
6 if I really am a Queen'
7 she said
8 as she sat down again

In the following table various cohesive devices are separately listed. Notice also that, in
one form or another, Alice is Theme for almost all the clauses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>cl#</th>
<th>Conjunctions/</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Pronominal reference</th>
<th>Ellipsis</th>
<th>Sense relations</th>
<th>Movement</th>
<th>Royalty</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>so</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>got up</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>she (Alice)</td>
<td>walked about</td>
<td>rather stiffly</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>as</td>
<td>she (Alice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>the crown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>but</td>
<td>she, herself, her (Alice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>and</td>
<td>I (Alice)</td>
<td>it (the crown)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>if</td>
<td>I (Alice)</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>as</td>
<td>Alice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>sat down</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
<td>she (Alice)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Alice chain is an identity chain of identical meanings passed from clause to clause
using the proper noun Alice and the referential pronouns I, she, herself and her, each
referring to Alice. The second chain is a similarity chain of Alice’s movements. Quite
possibly we could have included the crown’s movement in Clause 3 in this chain. The
third chain, which contains 'crown' and 'Queen' is another semantically related
similarity chain.

To sum up
By examining sequential and cumulative patterns of Theme, we can often discover the
degree to which:
- the messages mesh with an overarching purpose or concern
- the text exhibits a transparent design
- the speaker/writer anticipates the needs of the addressees (that is the hearer/reader
  should not be surprised by the choice of Theme as this would indicate that the
  progress or drift of the text is not well constructed).

It is easy to apply the ideas of thematic progression and thematic drift to uncover any of
the writer’s points of departure for a text, but there are other benefits from this simple
technique, especially when constructing our own texts. We can use the technique to
clarify that topical Themes progress in an orderly, and even predictable, way - either by
repeating the Theme or thematic pattern over several clauses or by incorporating the
Rheme from one clause into the Theme of the next. We can also use textual Themes to
make the connection between clauses clear. The resources are there in English for
staying with a Theme or for bringing elements in or out of psychological focus.
Implications for language teaching

Textual meanings organise the richness of experiential meanings and the fluidity of interpersonal meanings into coherent, comprehensible language. This chapter uses the metaphor of signposting to describe the work of textual meanings in the grammar of English. Many language teachers are already familiar with the notion of signposts. The information in this chapter allows us to build on this notion in several ways. This chapter also introduces us to resources that contribute to a text's cohesion. We will consider cohesion from the perspective of language teaching in the section on texture in Chapter 9.

How is knowledge of the textual grammar of the message useful to language teachers and learners?

A focus on textual meanings can have startling and immediate results in the language classroom, particularly in the teaching of literacy. When students' texts are difficult to follow and it is hard to pinpoint exactly what they are talking or writing about, the problem often originates in the choice of Themes and the expression of Rhemes.

In this chapter we are shown how organising meanings in English involves laying down language elements one after the other like railway tracks from the beginning to the end of the journey. In the clause, the Theme (the beginning of the journey) orients the reader to the experiential and interpersonal meanings in the text. It establishes what the meanings in the clause are concerned with and acts like a signpost to show where the meanings have come from and where they are going. Towards the end of the clause's journey, in the Rheme, is the 'point' of the clause (the destination of the journey) where the meanings have been heading. The beginning-end organisation of clause complexes, paragraphs and texts mirrors and draws on the beginning-end organisation of the clauses they contain. (A subtle Theme-Rheme organisation can also be glimpsed in groups and phrases.)

Theme can also be thought of as an anchor that secures the clause to what has gone before so it is not set adrift aimlessly in the text. Thus, at the beginning of a clause, students must learn to orient listeners and readers both by introducing what the clause is concerned with and by making a link back into the context or the preceding text to anchor the clause into the text. Similarly, in written texts, they must learn to use the topic sentence of a paragraph to anchor the paragraph to the introduction of the text.

Once the Theme has oriented the listener or reader effectively, new information introduced in the Rheme is more likely to make sense. In written texts information introduced towards the end of the clause often 'flows' into the beginning of the next clause. When we draft long texts, for example spoken presentations or essays, it is important to organise the information so that it flows thematically through the whole text in such a way that the audience can follow the meaning from beginning to end.
Once language learners understand how the ordering of language elements works in English to orient the audience and to signpost and organise meanings, they have gained a powerful tool for managing the meanings of texts which are just beyond their current level of language proficiency. In other words, an understanding of Theme can increase the comprehensible input accessible to students, especially when they work with written language.

How can knowledge of the textual grammar of the message enhance language teaching programs?

For language learners to organise meanings effectively into clauses, clause complexes, paragraphs and text, they need to make the beginning and the end of all units of language organisational focal points. They also need to know how to order words, clause constituents, clauses and paragraphs within texts.

When student writers struggling with basic clause structure write texts made of clauses which do not have an effective progression of topical Themes, the reader is not given any orientation to what the text is about nor any signposts to show where the information has come from and where it is going. When student writers introduce too many topical Themes unrelated to the thematic progression of the text, the reader easily loses the thread. The quality of writing in workplace, business and academic English can be improved dramatically if attention is given to the thematic progression of information in texts. If teachers use model texts to illustrate the basic patterns of thematic progression, students can apply these patterns to their own writing.

Student writers also need to be able to control the use of textual Themes; that is, conjunctions and other connecting words and phrases. It is textual Themes that language teachers have traditionally called signposts because of the work they do in shaping and structuring texts. This work makes their use critical to the organisation of texts which achieve their purpose effectively.

Learning how to manage interpersonal Themes is important for those learning how to manage spoken interaction. What comes first in the Mood Block signals the type of clause chosen to exchange meanings. For this reason, learning to manage the relationship between Mood and Theme is central to effective participation in spoken interactions, whether the student is joining in the interaction or sustaining it. Teachers can use their knowledge of Mood and Theme to prepare skeleton exchange outlines for students to use in guided practice activities and structured role plays.

This chapter introduces the idea of markedness—a notion that is particularly useful in language education. Students usually focus at first on unmarked language patterns; that is, on the expected way of structuring meaning in a particular clause. There is a point in their development, however, when students need to consider how to make elements of a clause stand out from the background, or deviate from the unremarkable pattern when this is necessary for their text to achieve its purpose.

In genres organised by time, such as story genres, using sequencing conjunctions as textual Themes (eg and, and then, when, as, after, next) is the unmarked way of signposting the unfolding of events. Once students have mastered these unmarked signposts, they can learn to use marked topical Themes such as Circumstances and dependent clauses (eg After lunch ... When I had finished with him ...) to highlight particular points of time in the unfolding of events.

Similarly, in texts which instruct, explain or persuade, using sequencing conjunctions as textual Themes (eg first, second, next, finally) is the unmarked way of signposting the move from step to step, phase to phase, or argument to argument. But students also need to learn how to highlight salient points in a process or argument by using Circumstances and dependent clauses as topical Themes (eg Slowly ..., If the ice melts ...). Marked Themes are the resource speakers and writers use to foreground, for example, manner, condition or cause. Careful and precise, even exact, use of marked Themes is often essential if a text is to achieve its purpose effectively, for example, a recipe, a scientific explanation or a legal argument.

When they are being introduced to a new genre, student writers can be guided with skeleton texts based on the structural pattern of the genre. Teachers prepare skeleton texts by writing the first paragraph of the text followed by a topic sentence and a series of clause Themes for each subsequent paragraph. The clause Themes include marked Themes as needed to achieve the purpose of the text. The students then draft a text of their own around this organisational skeleton.

The notion of Theme is particularly valuable in the teaching of reading, especially when student readers are working with information-rich texts in the subject areas of formal education. Students' attention can be drawn to each layer of Theme development one by one. Using a coloured highlighter, underlining, or a similar technique, students can uncover the way information is organised in the text by highlighting:

- the first paragraph
- the topic sentence of each paragraph
- the Themes of the clauses.

The first paragraph orient the reader to the text. The topic sentences orient the reader to each paragraph. The topical Themes of clauses signal what the text is concerned with (the gist of the text). Textual Themes and marked Themes signal structure and structural shifts as the text unfolds. Interpersonal Themes signal the kind of interaction taking place and the point of view of those interacting.

Following a study of Themes in a text, students can look through the remainder of the paragraphs and clause Themes to discover the 'point' of the text; that is, where the text is heading. These meanings usually accumulate until they are drawn together in the final paragraph in order to conclude the text's purpose effectively. Students can use a different colour, font or underline style to uncover the way information accumulates and is drawn together as the text unfolds.
The textual grammar of the message and text structure

We have already seen how textual grammar is used to signpost the structure of different types of texts. In fact, the textual metafunction is often called the ENABLING metafunction because it enables experiential and interpersonal meanings to be organised so that they can be realised in whole texts that make sense to listeners and readers. There are several ways that students can explore the interplay between the textual grammar of the message and text structure. They can undertake activities that explore the way interpersonal meanings are organised in order to structure spoken interactions using their knowledge of the word order that constructs declarative, interrogative and imperative clauses. During these activities students can practise using intonation patterns to highlight the textual grammar of the message, for example, the New information in the Rhemes of their clauses.

If learners undertake activities that explore the way Theme and Rheme are used to organise experiential and interpersonal meanings in structuring written texts, they will notice that often a choice of Theme or a shift in thematic progression signals that a text has moved into the next stage. For example, in narratives, students might look:

- in the Orientation for
  - Circumstances of time and place as marked Themes or in the Rheme in order to set the story in a time and place
- in the Complication for
  - time and sequence conjunctions as textual Themes to signpost unfolding events in a temporal sequence
  - Circumstances of time as marked Themes to highlight an event in a temporal sequence
  - a contrast conjunction (such as but) as textual Theme to signal the complication or crisis point of the story
  - an interpersonal Theme (such as unfortunately) to signal the way the writer is evaluating the events of the Complication
- in the Resolution for
  - a consequence conjunction (such as so) as textual Theme to signal a return to normality.

Notice how the name given to the first stage of the narrative pattern, Orientation, reflects the thematic work that is done with language at the beginning of stories written in this pattern.

If students have explored how patterns of Theme and Rheme enable the organisation of different types of texts, they can consciously and strategically draw on this knowledge to organise their own texts more effectively. An understanding of thematic progression can be very useful for both study and work where students need to read and write longer texts such as textbooks, essays or reports. Patterns of thematic progression recur at every level of longer texts. Just as Theme, or the beginning of a clause, orients the reader to the message in the clause, the same pattern can be seen in paragraphs and whole texts, even in sections and chapters of books.

Generally a topic sentence orients a reader to what a paragraph will be about and is usually the first sentence in the paragraph. It tends to predict the Themes of the sentences in the paragraph. The last sentence in the paragraph 'sums up' what the paragraph is about. This is the concluding sentence. Similarly, the introductory paragraph of a whole text orients the reader to what the text will be about and predicts the topic sentences of each paragraph of the text, while the concluding paragraph sums up the point of the whole text. In this way information flows in 'waves' at each level of the whole text. In longer texts the same wave pattern moves from the headings and conclusions of each section and into the introductory and concluding chapters.

Being able to control the expression of mode through thematic progression greatly enhances students' ability to read and construct longer texts. The thematic pattern across a text is very useful for readers of texts because it can guide note-taking and summarising. A quick way to find out what a lengthy text is about before deciding whether to read it in detail, is to read the first paragraph, the headings, the topic sentences and the concluding paragraph. For writers, knowing how to organise information into wave patterns which flow through the text is a useful tool for planning and drafting texts.

The textual grammar of the message and mode

The mode of a context of situation relates to the distance in time and space between people who are communicating and how this influences the way they manage that communication. For example, if people are communicating at the same time and in the same place, they are probably face-to-face and using spoken language. If people are communicating at the same time but from different places, they might use the telephone or perhaps interactive electronic chat. If people want to capture their communication so someone can use it at a later time, they will put it into written language.

The distance between the communication and the activity it is communicating about determines how much work the language has to do. If two people are sharing the same activity, there is a lot of contextual information which they can assume the other person is aware of and so they do not have to put it into language. In addition, they can supplement what they are saying with intonation, gesture and facial expression. If the person listening does not understand something or loses track of what is being talked about, they can ask for clarification or repetition immediately. When we play sport, for example, we might use language to direct the ball or show our excitement at a goal, but there is no need to organise a description of the place or the people, a list of the rules or a recount of the game.
When people are communicating about an activity at a distance, that is, in a different place or at a later time, the language will have to do a lot more work in order to reconstitute that activity for the audience. For example, if we are talking or writing about a sporting match that happened yesterday for people who were not there, we have to orient our audience to the time the game took place, the venue, the players, the spectators and the game so they are able to understand what we are telling them. As the distance in time and place between events and communication about them increases, the language has to do even more work. For someone learning a language this can be quite challenging.

Many people will have had the experience of a small child suddenly starting to talk about something without orienting the listener to their topic or their purpose. In this situation most adults automatically ask questions which guide the child to supply the missing meanings. For example, the adult might ask *Who did this happen to?* that is, they are asking for a Participant in Theme position. If they ask *When did this happen?* they are asking for a Circumstance of time as marked Theme. Language teachers can guide students in the classroom in similar ways.

Many problems in student writing occur because students either leave out or do not organise effectively the information the reader needs in order to reconstitute meaning at a distance. This meaning might be to do with a context which the reader does not share with the writer or it might relate to what is going on inside the writer’s head as they reflect on an aspect of experience.

One of the most effective ways to help student writers make meanings that bridge the distance between writer and reader is to give students opportunities to prepare a spoken language presentation of their material before they draft the written text. For example, if students are preparing to write a recount about a class excursion, the interim step would be for them to tell a group of people who did not go on the excursion what happened. This task will necessarily involve the students in organising their meanings so that the excursion is reconstituted through language for those who were not there.

Being able to control the expression of mode through textual grammar greatly enhances students’ ability to organise language to bridge the distance between themselves and their audience effectively, adjusting their language to manage, for example:

- the difference between face-to-face spoken interaction and spoken interaction on the telephone
- the difference between interactive spoken language in a shared context and written language for an audience who cannot provide any feedback and who have not shared the context or the activity.

In fact, being able to control the expression of mode through textual grammar is critical to the development of the higher level literacies students need if they are to be successful in education and employment.

Using the textual grammar of the message to build a critical response to text

Knowledge of textual grammar and thematic progression helps student readers and writers to develop the critical skills they need to evaluate the ‘readability’ of a written text – both their own texts and those of others.

Checking for effective thematic progression and drift in their own texts can be one of the earliest editing skills student writers are taught. Classroom activities can be designed in which students working in pairs and groups can use the metalanguage of Theme and thematic progression to discuss how to improve the organisation of their texts in order to improve signposting and information flow. Students can evaluate the thematic progression of a text, deciding whether:

- the Themes have provided an effective orientation for the reader in terms of topic and structure
- the accumulation of meanings at the end of clauses and paragraphs has culminated effectively in the final paragraph to give the text a clear point.

In addition, when students encounter a text they find difficult to read, looking for Theme patterns will reveal:

- whether the difficulty lies in the signposting and information flow of the text itself
- how to navigate the text in order to manage its meanings more easily.

Students might also explore how text organisation differs when we use different channels of communication, for example, face-to-face, telephone, email, electronic chat, letters, radio, television, newspaper or books. On the basis of their findings they might consider:

- the effect of different technologies on the way we organise our meanings
- the impact of new technologies on the meanings different groups of people are able to make
- how new technologies can be exploited most effectively and equitably.

Further reading

You can read more about cohesion and information units in Chapters 8 and 9 of An introduction to functional grammar: 2nd edition (Halliday 1994)) and in Language, context and text: Aspects of language in a social semiotic perspective (Halliday and Hasan 1985).

For a more detailed account of Theme read ‘The structuring of information in written English text’ (Fries 1992).

For a detailed account of text progression, see Martin (1992, Chapter 6).

For an account of how to use spoken language as an interim step to literacy for ESL learners see Gibbons (1991, 1998).