

# Unit 3

## Theme–Rheme (and Given–New)

Clause-as-message, and information unit

Slides for the session of

*Exploring English Grammar — the world of clauses*

held on

30.xi.2020



Theme–Rheme (and  
Given–New)

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Functional approach (1)

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Textual, interpersonal,  
and topical Themes

Grammatically 'marked'  
Themes

Robert Spence  
LangSciTech  
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## The learning goals for today's session are:

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- 2 To learn to analyse clauses into Theme and Rheme.



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- 1 To understand the difference between Theme–Rheme and Given–New structures.
- 2 To learn to analyse clauses into Theme and Rheme.
- 3 To learn to identify the most typical Themes for each grammatical mood.
- 4 To learn to identify textual, interpersonal, and topical Themes.
- 5 To understand the difference between grammatically ‘unmarked’ and grammatically ‘marked’ Themes.



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- 1 To understand the difference between Theme–Rheme and Given–New structures.
- 2 To learn to analyse clauses into Theme and Rheme.
- 3 To learn to identify the most typical Themes for each grammatical mood.
- 4 To learn to identify textual, interpersonal, and topical Themes.
- 5 To understand the difference between grammatically ‘unmarked’ and grammatically ‘marked’ Themes.
- 6 To understand and be able to identify predicated Themes and thematic equatives.



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- **Thema** [*topic*] In der Thema-Rhema-Gliederung der Mitteilung bzw. der Äußerung der (kommunikative) Ausgangspunkt, die Basis zur Entfaltung des Mitteilungsgehalts des Satzes: das Bekannte oder das durch Situation oder Kontext Gegebene; der Teil der Äußerung, der weniger Information enthält als das *Rhema*. T. ist das, worüber etwas mitgeteilt wird, und auch das, was aus Kontext und Situation ableitbar ist; Rhema ist das, was über das Thema mitgeteilt wird, was aus Kontext und Situation nicht ableitbar ist – die neue Information (Daneš 1970, 1976).

Th. Lewandowski: Linguistisches Wörterbuch 3.

Heidelberg/Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer [UTB 1518]: 1990 (5., überarbeitete Auflage).

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Th. Lewandowski: Linguistisches Wörterbuch 3.  
Heidelberg/Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer [UTB 1518]: 1990 (5., überarbeitete Auflage).
- But this definition is ambiguous (!!!)

# Theme: the Systemic Functional approach



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- The two concepts **Theme** (=‘what the message is about’) and **Given** (=‘derivable from situation / context’) are kept distinct:

Theme	Rheme
-------	-------

 ← clause-as-message

Given	New
-------	-----

 ← information unit

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Theme	Rheme
-------	-------

 ← clause-as-message

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 ← information unit

- ‘Theme’ is treated as a function in the structure of the clause-as-message (‘Theme-Rheme structure’).

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- ‘Theme’ is treated as a function in the structure of the clause-as-message (‘Theme-Rheme structure’).
- ‘Given’ is treated as a function in the structure of the information unit.
- Normally (but not always), one information unit coincides with one clause.

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- ‘Given’ is treated as a function in the structure of the information unit.
- Normally (but not always), one information unit coincides with one clause.
- Sometimes an information unit can be shorter or longer than one clause.



## Theme: the Systemic Functional approach (2)



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## Theme: the Systemic Functional approach (2)

- Theme–Rheme is realized by sequence.

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## Theme: the Systemic Functional approach (2)

- Theme–Rheme is realized by sequence.
- To signal that something is Theme in English, you put it in **first position** in the clause, to create a ‘**local context**’ for the message.

Theme	Rheme
the dinosaurs	were killed by an asteroid

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- The information unit is realized by intonation: one information unit is expressed as one ‘melody’ or **tone group**.

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Theme	Rheme
the dinosaurs	were killed by an asteroid

- The information unit is realized by intonation: one information unit is expressed as one ‘melody’ or **tone group**.
- The climax of the ‘New’ information is signaled by the Focus (which you can hear as the Nucleus of the tone group: the syllable “**AST**”)

Given?	Focus
	New
the dinosaurs were killed by an	<b>ASTeroid</b>

// .1. ^ the / dinosaurs were / killed by an \*/ **ASTeroid** //

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- ‘Helmut Kohl went to Halle’: shows all four possible ways Theme–Rheme and Given–New can map onto each other:  
<http://spence.saar.de/courses/grammar/unit03/halle.pdf>



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- one-page summary in German of the differences between Theme–Rheme and Given–New structure (slightly dogmatic):  
<http://spence.saar.de/courses/grammar/unit03/themrhem2.pdf>

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- Annabelle Lukin: Clause as message part 1 / Clause as message part 2 (scroll down the page)  
<https://vimeo.com/album/2028694>

## A sacrament as a semiotic act

- *“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, (...)”*

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## A sacrament as a semiotic act

- *“Dearly beloved, we are gathered here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, (...)”*
- Anyone who was raised in the Church of England knows that this is the beginning of a wedding ceremony, or to give it its official title: The Form of Solemnization of Matrimony. Matrimony, a.k.a. marriage, is one of the “sacraments” of the Church of England. But what is a sacrament?

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- **ACHTUNG! PROTESTANTENALARM!**
- A sacrament is defined in the Catechism of the Church of England as “an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace”. (The word “sign” here really means ‘signifiant’; the “grace” (= gift from God) is the ‘signifié’.)

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- The groom says the following words:  
*“With this Ring I thee wed,  
with my body I thee worship,  
and with all my wordly goods I thee endow”*

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- The groom says the following words:  
*“With this Ring I thee wed,  
with my body I thee worship,  
and with all my worldly goods I thee endow”*
- What comments would you make on the order of the parts of each clause? And what intonation would you use if you said this aloud?

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## Typical Themes for each grammatical mood

- The Theme–Rheme boundary is shown by #

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## Typical Themes for each grammatical mood

- The Theme–Rheme boundary is shown by #
- [imperative]    Predicator

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## Typical Themes for each grammatical mood

- The Theme–Rheme boundary is shown by #
- [imperative]    Predicator
- “Open # the window!”

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## Typical Themes for each grammatical mood

- The Theme–Rheme boundary is shown by #
- [imperative]    Predicator
- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-

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## Typical Themes for each grammatical mood

- The Theme–Rheme boundary is shown by #
- [imperative]    Predicator
- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
- “What # does he want?”

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- [imperative]    Predicator
- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
- “What # does he want?”
- [indicative: interrogative: yes/no]    Finite

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- “Did he # mean me?”

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- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
- “What # does he want?”
- [indicative: interrogative: yes/no]    Finite
- “Did he # mean me?”
- [indicative: declarative: exclamative]    Wh-

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- [imperative]    Predicator
- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
- “What # does he want?”
- [indicative: interrogative: yes/no]    Finite
- “Did he # mean me?”
- [indicative: declarative: exclamative]    Wh-
- “What a rude person # he is!”



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- “Open # the window!”
- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
- “What # does he want?”
- [indicative: interrogative: yes/no]    Finite
- “Did he # mean me?”
- [indicative: declarative: exclamative]    Wh-
- “What a rude person # he is!”
- [indicative: declarative: non-exclamative]    Subject

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- [indicative: interrogative: WH-]    Wh-
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- [indicative: interrogative: yes/no]    Finite
- “Did he # mean me?”
- [indicative: declarative: exclamative]    Wh-
- “What a rude person # he is!”
- [indicative: declarative: non-exclamative]    Subject
- “He # ’s crazy — he # ’s a grammarian.”



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THEME and MOOD

Textual, interpersonal,  
and topical Themes

Grammatically ‘marked’  
Themes

## Internal structure of a multiple Theme



Theme-Rheme (and  
Given-New)

Goals

Introduction

Theme: the Systemic  
Functional approach (1)

Learning Resources

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well	but	then	surely	Jean	wouldn't	the best idea	be to join in?
con- tinu- ative	struc- tur- al	con- junc- tive	mo- dal-	voc- at- ive	finite	topical	
textual			interpersonal				
Theme							Rheme

## Unmarked vs. marked Themes

	Function	Class	Clause example
unmarked Theme	Subject	nominal group: pronoun as Head	I # have a dream
		nominal group: noun as Head	my sister # has a new boyfriend
		nominalization	what I want # is a proper cup of tea
marked Theme	Adjunct	adverbial group	merrily # we roll along
		prepositional phrase	on Saturday night # I lost my wife
	Complement	nominal group: noun as Head	Eliot # you're particularly fond of
		nominal group: pronoun as Head	this # they should refuse
		nominalization	what chance gave # chance took away

(Based on Halliday and Matthiessen)