Unit 3

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Theme–Rheme (and Given–New)

Clause-as-message, and information unit

Print version of the
Exploring English Grammar — the world of clauses
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Robert Spence, LangSciTech, Saarland University

Goals

The learning goals for today's session are:

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.

1   Introduction

Theme: an ambiguous definition

· **Thema** [*topic*] In der Thema-Rhema-Gliederung der Mitteilung bzw. der Äußerung der (kommu- nikative) 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 is das, was über das Thema mitgeteilt wird, was aus Kontext und Sit- uation nicht ableitbar ist – die neue Information (Daneš 1970, 1976).
Th. Lewandowski: Linguistisches Wörterbuch 3. Heidelberg/Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer [UTB 1518]: 1990 (5., überarbeitete Auflage).
· But this definition is ambiguous (!!!)

2   Theme: the Systemic Functional approach (1)

Theme: the Systemic Functional approach

· 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

- '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.
- Sometimes an information unit can be shorter or longer than one clause.

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

- 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"**)

			Focus
Given?			New
the	dinosaurs were	killed by an	**ASTeroid**

‖.1. ∧ the / dinosaurs were / killed by an */ **ASTeroid** ‖

3 Learning Resources

Learning Resources

- '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`
- 'Helmut Kohl went to Halle' (color): (similar to the above):
  `http://spence.saar.de/courses/grammar/unit03/halle-farbe.pdf`
- 'Now comes the President here': worksheet
  `http://spence.saar.de/courses/grammar/questions02/index.pdf`
- 'Textuality: A first look' (four-page summary in English, to read for homework; will be incorporated in chapter 3 of the coursenotes):
  `http://spence.saar.de/courses/grammar/unit03/textuality.pdf`
- 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`
- Annabelle Lukin: Clause as message part 1 / Clause as message part 2 (scroll down the page)
  `https://vimeo.com/album/2028694`

4 A sacrament as a semiotic act

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?

- 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'.)
- 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"
- 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?

5 THEME and MOOD

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?"
- [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."

6 Textual, interpersonal, and topical Themes

Internal structure of a multiple Theme

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

7 Grammatically 'marked' Themes

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
	Comp-lement	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)