

EXPLORING THEMATIC STRUCTURES OF ONLINE NEWS REPORTS ON SPORT

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Abstract

This study analyse thematic structures from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, thematic structure, a foundational concept in textual function, plays a crucial role in carrying the line of meaning within sentences. The data was source from Voice of America through purposive sampling. The findings of the study reveal that VOA relies heavily on topical unmarked themes, which serve as the central focus of each clause in the news articles. Topical Unmarked Themes in organizing news content capture readers' attention and provide essential details. Additionally, Interpersonal Themes, incorporate personal judgments and engagement to the news. Textual Themes maintaining coherence and guide the readers. Marked Topical Themes occasionally deviate to emphasize specific information or introduce fresh angles. Rhemes, offering context and elaboration, enhance the clarity and depth of news content. Lastly, headlines, with their Theme-Rheme arrangement, serve as vital starting points, swiftly presenting new information to readers. Overall, this study sheds lights how VOA constructs news headlines, capturing readers' attention and delivering information effectively.

Keywords: Themes, Rhemes, Linguistics, News, Grammar, sport.

Introduction

The advent of online media has revolutionized global communication, profoundly impacting how people access and engage with information. Online journalism, exemplified by Voice of America (VOA) Online news, has become the contemporary mode of disseminating editorial content via the Internet. VOA, a multimedia broadcaster funded by the U.S. government, reaches audiences in over 40 languages, with a specific focus on Africa (Andrew 2018). This study delves into the evolution of online journalism and the unique role of VOA in delivering news and content across the African continent. The work highlights how online news has reshaped the media landscape, challenging traditional print media. It also emphasizes the importance of

readers' ability to extract specific information from news articles, with linguistic clues such as thematic structure playing a crucial role in this process. Thematic structure, a key concept in linguistics, defines the essence of a clause's message. Comprising the Theme and Rheme, it acts as a cohesive device, linking the message's topic to its content. This study explores thematic structure's role in making media texts coherent and easily comprehensible, focusing on its three primary functions: conveying new information, subjecting and predicting the clause, and framing and inserting coherence into sentences.

Methodology

Data sources for this study comprise documents, with the data being sourced from

Voice of America African News online. News reports are downloaded from the internet, printed, and manually sorted. Purposive sampling was employed to select reports, with a focus on four reports concerning sports-related issues. These selected reports are then presented as clause extracts and categorized using tables. Data analysis is carried out utilizing the Systemic Functional Grammar Model, with interpretations primarily centered on Theme and Rheme relationships.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts the theoretical framework of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics which provides a comprehensive understanding of thematic structure, describing it as the clause's structure that imparts its character as a message. This structure comprises two vital components: THEME and RHEME. The thematic structure encapsulates the arrangement of "The given" and "the new" information within a message, delineating patterns of foregrounding and backgrounding, cohesion, and continuity in clause organization. Additionally, the "Theme/Rheme" structure often corresponds to the "Given/New" information structure. According to Halliday, "The theme is the element that serves as the point of departure for the message; it is what the clause is concerned with." Themes are categorized as simple, multiple, or clausal. A simple theme manifests when the subject of the clause acts as the theme, while multiple themes involve a textual theme preceding the topical theme. Clausal themes materialize in compound sentences, where the first clause assumes the role of the theme (Halliday, 2000).

Thematic Structure, a foundational concept in textual function, plays a crucial role in carrying the line of meaning within sentences. The initial formulation of this concept can be attributed to Mathesius, who originally categorized sentences into three components: Theme, Narrative, and Transition (Han, 2010). Building upon Mathesius' work, Halliday (2000) later expanded and revised the thematic structure within the framework of systemic functional linguistics. Halliday proposed that any sentence or utterance can be dissected into two essential semantic components, namely the theme and rheme, which serve distinct communicative functions. In this context, the theme, positioned as the first element within a clause, conveys given information, whereas the rheme encapsulates the remaining elements, introducing new information and the progression of the message (Halliday and

Hasan, 1990). It's noteworthy that themes exhibit markedness and unmarkedness characteristics based on grammatical perspectives (Halliday, 2000). This division results in marked themes and unmarked themes, with the distinguishing factor being their relationship with the subject. Specifically, an unmarked theme corresponds to the subject's position and represents the most common form of theme in discourse, while a marked theme emerges when the subject does not serve as the theme. Marked themes often exhibit prominence and can incorporate circumstantial elements such as time and place. Theme and Rheme, also known as "topic" and "comment," "given" and "new," or "dominance" and "focus," have historical roots dating back to the eighteenth century when Weil (1844) introduced a clausal structure consisting of "a point of departure and enunciation" (as cited in Wang, 2001). These terms gained prominence in the work of Vilim Mathesius and other scholars associated with the Prague School of linguistics. Mathesius, in particular, highlighted the careful selection of information within sentences to ensure continuity. A typical sentence, as Mathesius proposed, consists of two parts: the theme, representing the known topic, and the rheme, introducing new information. This sequence, with the theme preceding the rheme, is the norm unless specific stylistic effects are desired.

Thus, this study is firmly grounded in Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics framework, which explores language within its social and communicative contexts. This framework aids in dissecting how themes and rhemes are structured within news headlines, elucidating their role in conveying information effectively and captivating readers (Halliday 2014). The study specifically centers on thematic elements such as topical themes (both marked and unmarked), interpersonal themes, and textual themes to unravel their contributions to proficient news communication.

Review

Several studies have explored themes and rheme in various texts, providing valuable insights into academic writing and discourse analysis. North (2005), utilizing the systemic functional approach, conducted an analysis of essays from students with diverse backgrounds. The findings revealed that arts students, employing more orienting themes, achieved higher assignment marks compared to science students. Arts students demonstrated explicit guidance in constructing coherent

interpretations, emphasizing thematic choices in academic writing, which contributed to their success in course assessment (North, 2005:438).

Wang (2007) delved into the relationship between Theme and Rheme in academic texts, using Systemic Functional Grammar to improve textual cohesion in students' writing. The study identified thematic progression issues in a politics major's essay, emphasizing the importance of thematic instruction to enhance academic text cohesion (Wang, 2007:7). While similar to North (2005) in textual analysis focus, their distinction lies in the types of texts analyzed—student essays versus media news reports.

Wei, J. (2014) provided an instructional package on Theme and Thematic Progression for Chinese EFL students, leveraging Systemic Functional Grammar theories. The study emphasized building students' meta-knowledge of coherence and Theme/Rheme structures, enhancing their understanding of information flow in English writing and improving overall coherence (Wei, 2014). The application of this instructional package in English writing teaching shows promise for future research in this area.

Dan F. and Shuxiang L. (2015) explored thematic structure's significance in college English writing, proposing strategies to improve clarity and organization. Their study highlighted the practical importance of thematic structure in college-level English writing, focusing on well-organized structures over correct grammar and extensive vocabulary.

Taiwo (2007) investigated Nigerian newspaper headlines, categorizing them based on thematic preoccupations and surface structures. This study drew parallels with the present work, exploring themes in news reports, albeit with differences in news sources and media types.

Olowe (1993) undertook a critical discourse analysis of Nigerian newspaper headlines, identifying linguistic features forming hidden ideologies. Thematisation emerged as a key element, emphasizing its role in inducing emotion and shaping readers' views on national issues.

Knox (2007) examined visual-verbal communication on online newspaper home pages, revealing genre-specific visual grammar trends. While not directly related to thematic structure, Knox's study stands out for its focus on the visual-verbal aspects of online news, setting it apart from literature predominantly

analyzing texts from a discourse analysis perspective.

Egins, S. (2004). *An Introduction to Systemic Functional Linguistics*. This foundational text provides an in-depth exploration of systemic functional linguistics, including its application to the analysis of themes and rheme in various texts.

Halliday, M. A. K., & Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2014). *An Introduction to Functional Grammar*. Authored by two influential figures in systemic functional linguistics, this book offers a comprehensive overview of the theory, providing insights into the role of thematic structures in language.

Butt, D., Fahey, R., Feez, S., Spinks, S., & Yallop, C. (2000). *Using Functional Grammar: An Explorer's Guide*. This practical guide explores the application of functional grammar, offering valuable insights into how thematic structures contribute to effective communication.

Martin, J. R., & Rose, D. (2007). *Working with Discourse: Meaning Beyond the Clause*. This work delves into discourse analysis and the role of thematic structures in constructing meaning beyond individual clauses, contributing to a broader understanding of communication.

Christie, F. (2002). *Pedagogy and the Shaping of Consciousness: Linguistic and Social Processes*. This book explores the intersection of pedagogy and linguistic processes, shedding light on how thematic choices in education contribute to shaping consciousness.

Coffin, C., & Donohue, J. P. (2014). *Applied Genre Analysis: A Multidimensional Model*. Focusing on genre analysis, this work examines how thematic structures contribute to the organization and communication goals of different text types.

Jeffrey, L., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2006). *Visual Constructions of Science: A Comparative Study of Theme and Rheme in Two Modes of Communication*. This study explores the visual aspects of thematic structures in scientific communication, providing a multidimensional perspective.

Macken-Horarik, M. (2002). *The Role of Thematic Structures in Primary School Literacy Learning*. This work investigates the development of thematic awareness in primary school students, offering insights into the acquisition of linguistic and communicative competence.

Webster, J. J. (2005). *Theme and Thematic Patterning in Chinese College Students' English Writing*. Focusing on Chinese college students,

this study examines how thematic patterns influence English writing, contributing to cross-cultural perspectives on thematic structures.

Matthiessen, C. M. I. M. (2015). Register in the Round: Diversity in a Unified Theory of Register Analysis. Matthiessen explores register analysis, providing a unified theory that encompasses thematic choices in discourse across various registers.

These works collectively contribute to the rich body of research on themes and rheme, offering diverse perspectives and applications in the analysis of language and communication. In contrast to existing studies, the present study

uniquely explores the Theme and Rheme of Thematic structure patterns in Voice of America African news online, offering a distinct contribution to the understanding of thematic structures in online news reporting.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The data presented below is on sports talking about a common sub-topic of ‘Paralympic,’ which had been reportedly held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the year 2016. It is also made up of four clauses with each having its themes, rhemes and theme types.

Extract A Clause 1

	Theme	Rheme	Type of Theme
1.	Roland Ezuruike of Nigeria	Reacts during the men’s Paralympic powerlifting competition, Rio de Janeiro Brazil Sept 9, 2016.	Topical unmarked theme
2.	Nigerian’s Paralympic athlete	Have outshined their able bodied counterparts in world competitions year after year.	Topical unmarked theme
3.	Yet, these athletes	Face such challenges as lack of proper training facilities and inadequate funding.	Interpersonal theme
4.	Abdulazeez Ibrahim, who’s known as Nigerian’s Para powerlifting champion	Is training hard for the powerlifting competition at the Paralympic games next year in Japan.	Topical unmarked theme
5.	In 2016, he	Was part of the disabled team who won medals for Nigeria at the Rio Paralympic games.	Textual theme
6.	Roland Ezuruike	Kisses his gold medal following the men’s Paralympic powerlifting competition, Rio de Janeiro Brazil Sept 9, 2016.	Topical unmarked theme
7.	Despite dominating world championship Abdulazeez	Says the performance of Nigerian’s Paralympic athletes are a result of their personal sacrifices and fighting spirits.	Textual theme

In the above clause, theme 1 presents one of the participants of the events; the corresponding rheme offers what such participant has to say on the events. The theme type here is topical unmarked theme

Theme 2 highlights ‘Nigeria’s Paralympic athletes,’ commending their winning streaks, as seen in the rheme. This is also a topical unmarked theme.

In theme 3, the athletes are still discussed with the rheme giving the challenges which they faced despite their reported laudable

performances at events previously. Its theme type is topical unmarked theme.

Theme 4 is on another event at the Paralympic games, which is Para powerlifting, naming its Nigeria’s champion and informing on his preparations towards future events. This is seen in the rheme. The theme type is topical unmarked theme

Theme 5 still stays with the champion’s story, giving extra information on his contributions to the events in Brazil, as seen in the rheme. It has its theme type as topical unmarked theme

In theme 6, the participant who had been introduced in theme 1 is re-introduced here, with the rheme describing his reactions to the

medals which he had won together with his team. It is topical unmarked theme

Theme 7 is the last theme of this clause. It brings the champion who was earlier referred to in theme 4. The theme provides the champion's opinions on the reason behind Nigeria's

outstanding performance at the Paralympic. It is a topical unmarked theme.

Clause 2: It brings another sub-topic, which is Basketball. It has fewer themes than the previous clause, having only six clauses.

Extract B Clause 2

	Theme	Rheme	Type of Theme
1.	Africa's professional basketball league due to be launched in 2020	Is expected to be a show case for new talent.	Topical unmarked theme
2.	With the support of Africa-born former professional stars like Dikembe Mutombo, young talent already	Have the incentive to step up their game.	Textual Theme
3.	Sitting on the benches at Kilamba Arena, former NBA Star and hail of former Dikembo Mutombo	Was helping set up a national Basketball Association supported clinic, to train and observe new talent in Luanda the capital of Angola where he made a visit in May and spoke to the young players.	Textual theme
4.	Mutombo	Is following his roots, as he was born in and grew up in Kinshasa, a 45 minute flight from Angola before he became an NBA all Star.	Topical unmarked theme
5.	I think my presence means a lot to these young people who	Are playing the game here, that I am still caring about them.	Topical unmarked theme
6.	We	Are following them and we want them to succeed and use want the game of basketball to countries to grow in the continent. Mutombo said.	Topical unmarked theme

In the above extract, theme1 begin with 'Africa's professional basketball league' which was expected to be launched back in 2020. The corresponding rheme talks about what was to be expected of the league. The type of theme is topical unmarked theme

Theme 2 is a further development of theme 1, expressing the hope of Africa's chances in basketball, which is premised on its young stars, and the rheme expresses their collective capability. The theme type is textual theme

Theme 3 introduces a former NBA star; its rheme describes his efforts towards the success of National Basketball in Luanda, Angola. It is a textual theme. Theme 4 stays with the former star story while the rheme gives some

biographical information on him. It is a topical unmarked theme.

Theme 5 gives his opinion of young people's perception of him, and the theme explains more on such perception. The theme type is topical unmarked theme. The last theme here, which is theme 6 gives a summary of the basketball star's opinion. The rheme does the same. The theme type is topical unmarked theme

Clause 3: It has more themes than the first two before it. It is made up of eight themes. The basic sub-topic here is dwarfism and sports, particularly in Kenya. This flows from one theme to the other throughout the clause.

Extract C Clause 3

	Theme	Rheme	Type of Theme
1.	Kenyan's affected by dwarfism	Are using football (soccer) to fight stigma.	Topical unmarked theme
2.	The short stature society of Kenya	Formed East Africa's first dwarf football (soccer) team just over a year ago, with the hope of turning it into a national league to spread across the region.	Topical unmarked theme
3.	Ten minutes late, a referee	Blows the whistle marking the start of the start of the first friendly match between Kenya's lion stars FC team and the AC Milan FC made up of under 14's.	Topical unmarked theme
4.	This	Is no ordinary game it is a match pitting Kentan dwarves against a teen club.	Topical unmarked theme
5.	Ruth Mueni, the chairperson of the short stature society of Kenya	Is among the founders of the lion stars.	Topical unmarked theme
6.	The lions	Lose the game against the under 14's, 2-nill, but easily take the one against the under 10s, one-nil.	Topical unmarked theme
7.	Lions FC team captain Joseph Maina	Is happy with his team's progress.	Topical unmarked theme
8.	If we	Are to complete this journey and hit our target which is the world Dwarf gams and Copa Labaja in Peru, they have to believe in themselves. Maina Said.	Topical marked theme

In the above clause, theme 1 introduces the country of origin of the dwarfs in question. The rheme discusses their aim in sports, particularly football. The theme type is topical unmarked theme. Theme 2 reveals their association's name, its rheme is on their efforts towards spreading their course, and the theme type here is topical unmarked theme.

In theme 3, the dwarfs are captured performing in the field, with the rheme describing their performances and the two teams involved in the present game. It is a topical unmarked theme.

Theme 4 is still on the football match, the rheme is on who is being played with. It is topical unmarked theme.

Theme 5 presents the chairperson of the dwarfs association, the rheme lists her among the founders, and its theme type is topical unmarked theme

Theme 6 is on 'The Lions,' which refers to the dwarf's current team at play. The corresponding rheme discusses their efforts, and the type of theme here is topical unmarked theme

The captain of the theme is introduced in theme 7; the rheme expresses his happiness at his team's progress.

Theme 8 is as a result of the previous theme; its rheme gives the captain's suggestions on the way forward for his team. The theme type is topically unmarked theme

Clause 4: It is the last clause of Extract E, having seven themes, still on basketball but this time capturing only one basketball star who had

been interviewed by VOA. She features prominently from themes 1 to the last.

Extract D Clause 4

	Theme	Rheme	Type of Theme
1.	Iris	Was scouted by the program from her local team in Gabon.	Topical unmarked theme
2.	The experience	Has been so enriching for us, Iris, a 16 year old from Gabon told VOA.	Topical unmarked theme
3.	It's	Helps me a lot, I've learned new things and it's renewed my enthusiasm, my desire to keep going and to become someone in the world of basketball.	Topical unmarked theme
4.	Iris	Says she was scouted for the program by organisers who watched her local team play in Gabon.	Topical unmarked theme
5.	Iris	Was then asked to produce a video of her playing and was later informed that she'd neem accepted to the program.	Topical unmarked Theme
5.	The coaches and mentors	Are helping these young players through drills and matches but also serve as role models of what the youngsters can become.	Topical unmarked theme
7.	One such role model is Aston Ndiaye originally from Senegal who	Was playing for Detroit shocks, which won the 2003 WNBA championship.	Topical unmarked theme

In the above clause, theme 1 gives her name; the rheme follows this up by giving her origin which is traced to Gabon. The theme type is topical unmarked theme. Theme 2 is on her 'experience,' which is further described in the corresponding rheme, resulting to a topical unmarked theme.

Theme 3 captures her reaction to her featured experience, the rheme gives how she had been helped by such, and the theme type is topically unmarked theme

Themes 4 and 5 stay with her name and describe her beginning and growth in the game of football. This is seen in their common rheme of describing the subject of interest. Both themes are topical unmarked themes.

Theme 6 gives the basketball star's role model's name and where she had played in her days and the extent to which she had gone. The theme type here is topical unmarked theme.

Findings of the Study

Based on the provided data and the analysis of thematic structures using M.A.K. Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics the following are findings and comments on the impact of the study on the themes:

I. Dominance of Topical Unmarked Themes

The study reveals that VOA predominantly uses Topical Unmarked Themes to organize its news. These

themes serve as the main subjects of the clauses and are essential for conveying the primary information in the headlines. This choice of thematic structure is likely aimed at immediately capturing the readers' attention and providing key details.

II. **Interpersonal Themes**

Interpersonal Themes are used to convey the writer's or speakers personal judgments on the meaning. These elements, which include vocatives, modals, and mood-marking, are significant in adding a layer of evaluation and expression to the news content. This allows for a more engaging and subjective presentation of information.

III. **Textual Themes**

Textual Themes are used to give thematic prominence to textual elements that have a linking function, such as continuatives or conjunctions. They play a crucial role in structuring the flow of information within the text. In news reporting, this helps in maintaining coherence and guiding the reader through the story.

IV. **Marked Topical Themes**

While Topical Unmarked Themes are the norm, the study identifies instances of Marked Topical Themes. These themes stand out and attract attention because they deviate from the expected pattern. They likely serve to emphasize specific information or introduce a new angle to the news.

V. **Rhemes**

Rhemes, which provide elaboration and additional information to the themes, are essential for conveying the full meaning of each clause. They contribute to the clarity and depth of the news content by offering context, explanation, or background to the themes.

VI. **Headlines as Information Starting Points**

In news reporting, headlines play a crucial role as they are the first point of contact for readers. The thematic structure of headlines, with the Theme-Rheme arrangement, allows for the immediate presentation of new information. This ensures that readers

quickly grasp the essence of the news report.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study it is concluded that VOA (Voice of America) predominantly employs Topical Unmarked Themes in its news, emphasizing immediate capture of readers' attention and provision of key details. Interpersonal Themes, including vocatives and modals, add a layer of evaluation, contributing to a more engaging presentation. Textual Themes aid in maintaining coherence in news reporting. Marked Topical Themes serve to emphasize specific information or introduce novel angles. Rhemes play a crucial role in providing elaboration and depth to news content. Headlines, with a Theme-Rheme arrangement, act as vital starting points for conveying immediate information to readers.

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