A TEXTUAL ANALYSIS OF THEME AND RHEME STRUCTURES IN MALAYSIAN EDITORIALS

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Abstract: The present study aims to analyze the way writers use language in order to fulfill a purpose by measuring the similarities and differences in Malaysian editorials with regard to theme and rheme choices. Two letters of opinion of an editorial were used in this study to investigate the thematic choices that might differ, given their different purposes. The results indicated that the writers presented the information directly without emphasizing on any proposition encoded in the clauses, suggesting the writers' inclination towards providing information instead of persuading the readers. Besides, it was also found that the intervention of personal opinions made by the writers is less obvious, as measured by the low occurrence of Interpersonal Theme. In addition, it can also be concluded that the letter of support is more cohesive than the letter of oppose because of its higher occurrence of Textual Theme.

Keywords: Textual metafunction; theme and rheme; editorials; systemic functional linguistics; comparative studies

1. Introduction

One important implication of the functional view of language is that context and language are interdependent. As such, the written language of a text offers a vast variety of grammatical tools to express the writer's intended message. In newspaper for instance, the linguistics choices that the writers make express the events that take place in the real world. Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) involves the idea that a language consists of a set of systems, which offers the writers an unlimited choice of ways of creating meanings (Bloor & Bloor, 2004). One of the main assumptions of SFL is that language serves three main purposes: the experiential (or ideational), through which language users express their view of the world; the interpersonal, through which language users establish and maintain social contact; and the textual, which allows for the first two to be brought together and organized in a way that is communicatively effective (Heilman & McCabe, 2007).

In this study, the focus is on the textual metafunction to demonstrate the ways in which writers make linguistic choices to express what is essentially the same or similar issue in very different ways, with seemingly different ends: to agree or to oppose. Letters of opinion are different than that of news report in which they have the purpose of providing commentary, or evaluating those events rather than reporting the event in an objective way (Heilman & McCabe, 2007). For purposes of demonstration, two different texts were chosen, with a similar subject matter, which is regarding the government's plan to build nuclear plants in our country. The texts were of two letters of opinion from the The Star, which were published on the same week. The data was used in order to analyze the ways in which writers make choices in the textual component through theme, and to show how these differing ways of writing the letters can be achieved through language. This study aims to show the value of the linguistic theory for elucidating the ways in which meaning is encoded through the textual metafunction.

2. Aims of the Study

Looking at language from the point of view of the textual metafunction can help the readers to see how writers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event, which in this study refers to letters of opinion (Thompson, 2004). As well as interacting with their readers and saying something to them about the world, writers constantly organize the way their message is worded in order to signal to them how the present part of their message fits in with other parts. Therefore, the aims of this study are:

1. To measure the similarities and differences between two letters of opposing views with regard to theme and rheme choices.
2. To analyze the way writers use language in order to fulfil a purpose or an aim.

3. Research Questions

A number of questions which this study proposes to address can be raised based on the discussion so far:

1. What are the similarities and differences between two letters of opposing views withregard to theme and rheme choices?
2. How is language used by writers to fulfil a purpose or an aim?

These questions are procedural, in that they deal with the application of the construct to the data. The questions are related to the results of the application of the analytical tool. Obviously, however, these two questions are of important ones to keep in mind, as the validity of the results rests on the validity of the tool used for comparison.

While the above questions guide the study, the basic overall hypothesis for this study is based on a theory of SFL which posits that texts are products of social processes, and that texts having similar audiences, purposes and content will display similarities in linguistic choices (Exley & Mills, 2012). Thus, the hypothesis of this study is that barring grammatical constraints, editorials or opinion letters will display similarities with respect to thematic and rhematic content, i.e. choices from the textual metafunctions, and thematic progression patterns across opposing views, specifically here across supportive-based letter and opposition-based letters published in the local dailies.

There have been researches done previously similar to this study, which analyzed Theme and Rheme in editorials (Irianti, 2010; Whiliandi, 2011; Akindele & Lawal, 2017). It can contribute to systemic-functional linguistics, specifically theme-based genre studies. Based on the perceived similarities in the communicative function and purpose of the editorials, the texts analyzed in this study specifically belong to the genre of personal opinions. It has been seen that texts belongingto the same genre present a similar contextual configuration; in other words, they will show similarities in linguistic choices (Halliday & Hassan, 1989, as cited in Ren, 2010). Furthermore, it has been stated that an analysis of the experiential, interpersonal, and textual choices in the themes and the rhemes of the clauses will provide a composite representation of their communicative potential, which can then be interpreted with respect to the context of situation for which they were written.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Towards a discourse definition of Theme

The textual metafunction of a text is determined by its symbolic organization (mode), which includes the channel or medium, and the rhetorical mode of the text (Halliday, 1978).

The term 'Theme' was first introduced by a linguist from a Prague school, named Mathesius, which was later developed by Halliday and other linguists (Cai, Meng and Wu, 2005). From the surface analysis, it might be tempting to say that the theme is what the clause is all about. However, there are instances such as in thematized comment whereby the rheme becomes the main idea of the clause. Therefore, it is better to follow the definition of theme given by Halliday, which is that theme is given information serving as "the point of departure" of a message (Wang, 2007).Thompson (2004) also cited Halliday's definition of theme as an element that locates and orients the clause within its context. In identifying themes, it is possible to categorize them into declarative clause and non-declarative clause. Theme in declarative clause is a clause in which the theme is easier to be identified, specifically in a statement or declaration. In declarative clause, the themes can take up the form of subject, adjunct, as well as complement, in which the adjunct and complement are considered as marked theme with the subject as unmarked theme. Theme in non-declarative clause is when the theme can exist in interrogative clause, imperative clause, as well as exclamative clause.

4.2. Implications of Theme-Rheme theory

Writers or speakers place their concerns within the message as the thematic content. The theme then forms a context for interpreting the remainder of the message and can orient readers to the remaining message, which is called the rheme (Thompson, 2004). A study by Cai, Meng and Wu (2005) found that theme-rheme theory can help readers to follow the writer's train of thought and accelerate their reading speed. Davison (1980, as cited in Cai, Meng & Wu, 2005) stated that the more marked the construction is, the more likely that an implicated meaning will be conveyed. Therefore, by taking a closer look at the themes chosen by the writer, the intended or explicit meaning of the message will be discovered by the readers.

4.3 Comparative Studies Using Theme-Rheme Analysis

A number of studies have been carried out which find correlations between thematic content or thematic progression and genres. McCabe (1999) compared the theme and thematic patterns in Spanish and English history texts while Heilman and McCabe (2007) compared the textual and interpersonal differences between a news report and an editorial. A study on theme-rheme in translation-based studies also found that by studying the theme-rheme analysis in a text, students' awareness of different patterns of textual organization is increased (Daniel & Mihaela, 2013). A study by Jing (2015) on thematic progression in English writing teaching found that by teaching students on the principle of theme-rheme, they may become more aware of how information and ideas should flow in a text so that it could be easily understood by the reader.

Potter (2016) conducted a study on the pattern of theme-rheme in news reports and found that it can unlock the meaning-potential in Arabic clauses and detect underlying ideologies in English and Arabic news reports. There are however, not many researches done on the comparison between two texts of the same genre but different opinions. This is primarily because most researchers aimed at measuring the differences across genres and how it can influence the way the texts are constructed in terms of its thematic structure in order to suit the intended purpose of the writer. The present study however, aims to find out the differences between two texts within the same genre, which is opinion, but with different attitude from the writers. Thus, by looking at the theme-rheme analysis of both texts, the readers might be able to compare and contrast as well as justify the similarities and differences that exist between the two texts in terms of its linguistic structure in order to unveil the writer's intended meaning in expressing his or her personal opinions.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research Instruments

The data gathered in this research were of editorials, in which two letters of contradicting opinion on the same subject matter or issue were being analyzed. This research looked at the differences in linguistic choices in these two letters with respect to theme and rheme. Both letters were taken from The Star, Opinion Column. Both letters were published on the same week, with the first letter dated 14 March 2011, while the second letter dated 16 March 2011. The subject matter being discussed in both letters was related to the Malaysian government's plan to build nuclear plants in the country, in which the writer of the first letter entitled 'Nuclear plants face risk of tsunamis' was clearly against this idea. The second letter, entitled 'Think coolly when tackling a situation', however, showed that the writer strongly supported the idea of building the nuclear plants in the country. Therefore, this research looked at the thematic choices that might differ across the two letters of different opinions, given their different purposes; to support and to oppose.

5.2. Research Procedures

The methodology used in this research is an analysis through Systemic Functional Linguistics approach, specifically by looking at the textual metafunction of the text. The two letters were analyzed by using the theme and rheme analysis, whereby the theme choices are topical, interpersonal as well as textual. The topical theme was further divided into two types, which are marked and unmarked themes. The presence of more than one theme choice in a sentence is considered as multiple Theme.

After analyzing the data, the qualitative analysis of the data was presented and the findings were quantified in a distribution table, in which all the three themes namely topical, interpersonal and textual as well as the rhemes were converted into percentages. This is to identify the probability of the occurrence of each element in both letters, and finally to compare the result of both analyses.

This study is not a statistical analysis; the quantitative data is used as a basis for interpretation, to link the textual elements with the context and situation of the text. It is based on Hallidayan grammar, generally on the notions of theme/rheme, and notions of textual theme, interpersonal theme and experiential theme.

Letters of opinion are different than that of news report, whereby news report tend to be straightforward, matter of fact, to present the facts, as it were, and facts we would expect to be presented as monoglossic, as not open to debate (Heilman & McCabe, 2007). Editorials, on the other hand, might include more interpersonal themes compared to news report which almost always avoid the use of interpersonal themes to retain the aura of objectivity. A detailed analysis of theme-rheme structure can also help us to diagnose whether the text is cohesive or not, and if not, how it can be improved.

6. Theoretical Framework

6.1. Textual Metafunction

The ways in which human beings use language are classified in Systemic Functional Linguistics into three broad categories known as metafunctions. The first two are known as ideational metafunction and interpersonal metafunction. Bloor and Bloor (2004) define the former as when language is used to organize, understand and express our perceptions of the world and of our own consciousness.

The latter, on the other hand, refers to when language is used to enable us toparticipate in communicative acts with other people, to take on roles and to express and understand feelings, attitude and judgements. The last meta-function is known as textual metafunction. This metafunction differs than the first two in the sense that it involves the use of language to organize the text itself. It relates to what is said (or written) to the rest of the text and to other linguistics events (Bloor & Bloor, 2004).

The textual metafunction is realized through the word order of the sentences, through which the writer sequences the message for the reader, and also through the numerals, first, second, third, and fourth, which the writer uses to signal the salient points of his message. When language is looked at from the point of view of the textual meta-function, it will provide better understanding of how speakers construct their message in order to fit in the text or in a conversation (Cerban, 2004).

6.2. Theme and Rheme

One key choice in the textual configuration of discourse is that of what will appear in theme and rheme position. Theme and rheme are two terms which represent the way in which information is distributed in a sentence. The theme of a clause is simply the first constituent of the clause (Thompson, 2004). Theme provides the settings for the remainder of the sentence – Rheme. Rheme is the remainder of the message in a clause in which theme is developed, that is to say, rheme typically contains unfamiliar or new information (Wang, 2007). Halliday, whose insights form a very important part of this paper, believes that a writer selects theme with a certain purpose rather than randomly to indicate the key information (Cai, Meng & Wu, 2005).

6.3. Simple Theme

For Halliday, the topical theme of the declarative clause in English consists of one structural element functioning as a participant, process or circumstance in the clause (Heilman & McCabe, 2007). In the case of a nominal group as theme, this may coincide with the Subject of the clause, as in the participant, and in English, this is considered to be the unmarked option for theme choice. Marked options in English include starting off with a circumstance, as these can be positioned elsewhere in the clause.

6.4. Multiple Theme

A text producer may decide to make thematic some textual or interpersonal element of the clause. These other elements can be divided into two groups. They are textual element, which includes continuative, structural and conjunctive elements, which provide links between ideas; and the other one is interpersonal element, which is any combination of vocative, modal or mood-marking elements, which provide commitment to or comment on the proposition encoded in the clause (Heilman & McCabe, 2007). These two elements are also considered as part of the Theme, this is then called a Multiple Theme.

7. Findings And Discussion

Table 1 provides the percentages (based on the total number of clauses) of the letters in terms of the frequency of Textual and Interpersonal Themes, as well as the Topical Unmarked (subject) and Marked Themes (something other than subject). L1 refers to Letter 1 (oppose) while L2 refers to Letter 2 (support).

Table 1.0: Types of Themes

Types of Themes	L1 (%)	L2 (%)
Topical Marked Theme	-	22
Topical Unmarked Theme	100	78
Textual Theme	48	51
Interpersonal Theme	4	3

There are some differences between the two letters of opinion with respect to their theme choice. In the two letters analyzed here, there is a much differential frequency of Textual, Interpersonal, and Topical Marked as well as Topical Unmarked Themes. From the above table, we can make the following four points regarding the main findings noted in the study:

1. L1 did not incorporate any Topical Marked Theme;
2. Both L1 and L2 contained more Unmarked Themes compared to Marked Themes;
3. L2 incorporated higher number of Textual Themes compared to L1; and
4. Both L1 and L2 are not highly interpersonal due to the low occurrences of the Interpersonal Themes.

8. Topical Marked Theme

A Marked Topical Theme is a Topical Theme which is not the Subject. It is called 'marked' because it usually stands out and attracts attention as it is not what we normally expect to find. This type of Theme also gains a greater textual prominence and is often important in structuring the larger discourse (Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997).

Table 2.0: Topical Marked Theme in LI and L2

Letter	Sentence	Topical Marked Theme	Rheme
L1	-	-	-
L2	S20	[...] and in the long run,	may only serve to bring more harm than good.

There is not any instance of Topical Marked Theme in L1. This choice of writing indicates the writer's attempt of presenting information directly without emphasizing on any circumstantial adjuncts for instance. Therefore, the writer only used Subject as the theme in his writing, in which the mood presented is mainly declarative.

There are eight instances of Topical Marked Theme in L2. This suggests that its contextual reasons overrule the unmarked choice of subject. Towards the end of the text, when timing becomes an important aspect of the activity, there is a temporal circumstance as a TopicalMarked Theme (refer to S20). This suggests that the writer had already established that he was organizing what he was saying in terms of time sequence, hence the choice of 'in the long run' as the Theme. Therefore, the writer of L2 successfully incorporated contextual pressures towards the end of his writing.

9. Topical Unmarked Theme

A Topical Unmarked Theme refers to instances whereby the first topical element of the clause is the Subject, which said to be of neutral and gives the theme no special prominence (Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997).

Table 3.0: Topical Unmarked Theme in L1 and L2

Letter	Sentence	Topical Unmarked Theme	Rheme
L1	S10	Coincidently, *the reactor that blew up in Chernobyl*	has a capacity of 1,000MW, similar in capacity to the one planned here.
	S5	*We* have always managed to convince ourselves that we	live in a safe earthquake-free zone, […]
L2	S19	*As matured citizens,* we	should look at the facts before rushing off to make our own conclusions.
	S15	*We*	may not be ready for nuclear power, […]

Out of 23 instances of Topical Unmarked Theme in L1, eight of them occurred as the nominal group, acting as the Subject that includes a long post-modifier. In this case, the Subject may be fairly extensive (refer to S10).

There are also six occurrences of 'We' as the Subject. This pattern displays a consistency of choice. This suggests that the writer was trying to address the readers as a community to agree to his opinion in opposing the issue presented. Hence, the same Subject was repeated numerous times (refer to S5).

There are 28 instances of Topical Unmarked Theme in L2, one of them is preposed attributive as Theme (refer to S19). Thompson (2014) defines preposed attributives as clauses whereby an attribute of the Subject is placed in front, rather than following it. He further noted that this structure is often associated with the registers such as tourism and advertising. Hence, this explains the reason the writer employed the use of this structure, as letter of opinions carry similar objective as advertising, which is to persuade readers to agree to the propositions made by the writer.

Similar to L1, there are also six occurrences of 'We' as the Subject. This pattern too displays a consistency of choice. However, as the purpose of the letter was to support, the writer was trying to address the readers as a community to agree to his opinion in supporting the issue presented. Hence, the same Subject was repeated numerous times (refer to S15).

10. Textual Theme

Textual Themes almost always constitute the first part of the Theme, coming before any Interpersonal Themes. They give thematic prominence to textual elements with a linking function (Martin, Matthiessen & Painter, 1997). They also relate the clause to its context. They can be structural conjunctions which link two clauses in a coordinating relation or mark one clause as dependent on another, or they can be conjunctives, providing a cohesive link back to previous discourse.

Table 4.0: Textual Theme in LI and L2

Letter	Sentence	Textual Theme	Rheme
L1	S4	This means *that nuclear plants in coastal areas*	are also vulnerable to future calamities brought about by climate change.
	S7	And, scientists have predicted *that there*	will be more intense earthquakes in the Sumatran region in the next 100 years.
L2	S14	[…] *but* the overall attitude to our nation becoming a nuclear power	is unbeneficial to the nation in the long run.
	S15	[…] *but* this does not mean that we	should adopt an attitude that encumbers technological development.

There is a high frequency of structural conjunctions incorporated in L1. Out of the 12 occurrences of Textual Theme in L1, six of them are structural conjunctions functioning as marking one clause as dependent on another. Where a dependent (modifying, subordinate) clause precedes the main clause, it can be interpreted as having thematic status for the clause complex as a whole (refer to S4 and S7).

There is a much higher frequency of Textual Themes in L2. Out of the 19 Textual Themes included in L2, only six are additional 'and'. All of the rest are concessive: 'but', 'while' and 'when', among others. If we look at those Textual Themes, an interesting pattern emerges. L2 mainly incorporated the function of structural conjunctions as linking two clauses in a coordinating relation, as opposed to the function of structural conjunctions as marking one clause as dependent on another, as incorporated in LI. On the account of Theme, Textual Adjuncts are seen as linking or binding clauses together, which perhaps does not do justice to their semantic role of also providing Interpersonal comment. For instance, in the examples above (S14) and(S15), 'but' serves as a Textual Theme and conjunction, as it links to the previous clause, in which the writer's awareness of the nation's unpreparedness towards the implementation of nuclear power was made clear. The 'but' indicates that the writer expects the reader to assume that there is the possibility that Malaysia is not ready for the change, and thus that proposition by default would be expected, or normal. Thompson and Hunston (2000, as cited in Heilman & McCabe, 2007) suggest that conjuncts "such as 'and' and 'but' and subordinators such as 'because' and 'although' assume a common ground between reader and writer in terms of what is expected or unexpected at any given point in the discourse".

The function of conjuncts such as 'but' and 'however' is to provide a link between propositions based on how the writer views the expectedness of the upcoming proposition in light of the previous proposition. The writer could have left out 'but' in the example under consideration. The readers would still link the two ideas given their contiguity, yet by including 'but', the writer is inserting openly the opinion that, given the dangers of nuclear power, it is expected that Malaysia is not yet ready. Here, the textual and interpersonal functions blend through the use of conjuncts. Thus, the writer uses conjuncts in a way which not only provides cohesion for the readers, but also gives the readers glimpses into the writer's take on the propositions. This finding correlates with that from Oliveira (2015) whereby she noted that the use of textual themes in English language learners' writing seem to help them to control the flow of information and to organize the information by showing relationships between the various clauses.

11. Interpersonal Theme

The Interpersonal Theme is concerned with social relationships as they are realized in text, in this case the interaction between the writers of the letters and the readers. Obviously, writer's intervention is a constant in the letters: simply put, the letters are written by writers. However, writers can choose to make their intervention more or less obvious, and they can do so through the Interpersonal Theme in several different ways.

Table 5.0: Interpersonal Theme in L1 and L2

Letter	Sentence	Interpersonal Theme	Rheme
L1	S10	*Coincidently,* the reactor that blew up in Chernobyl	has a capacity of 1,000MW, similar in capacity to the one planned here.
L2	S2	Although *unlikely* to suffer a Chernobyl-style disaster, the possible partial meltdown at the station	has led to many parties voicing their opinions on the problems with nuclear energy, […]

There is only one occurrence of Interpersonal Theme in L1, which is Modal Adjunct 'Coincidently'. Modal Adjuncts are of special interest in considerations of theme as they are flexible as to their placement in the clause: writers can choose to place them at the beginning of the clause, at the end, or somewhere in between (e.g. after the Subject). According to Halliday (1994: 49, as cited in McCabe, 1999), they tend to come at the beginning of the clause, as it is natural for speakers to thematize their own angle on the matter, to make this the point of departure. Surprisingly, the writer only includes one such element in his letter (refer to S10), when in fact, articles from newspapers are expected to be imbued with Interpersonal Themes as they are often controversial and reflect the writers' personal bias towards a certain subject (Harrop, 2007).

Similarly, L2 incorporated only one element of Interpersonal Theme, also in the form of Modal Adjunct 'unlikely'. The slight difference is, it is positioned in the middle of the clause between a Textual Theme and a Topical Marked Theme (refer to S2), instead of in the initial position, as in L1 (refer to S10). The almost inexistence of this element suggests that the writer chose to present his ideas directly and as truthful as possible, without injecting any personal mood into his writing. This finding correlates with that of Talib (2014) whereby she concluded from her study on the thematic progression of Malaysian higher education advertorials that the lack of interpersonal themes in those advertorials is due to the fact that the writers' main objective is probably to introduce readers to the issue without overwhelming them with personal opinions.

12. Conclusion

This study sheds light on differences between two texts of differing opinions, opposing and supporting, by analyzing the textual metafunction of language in two letters. The textual metafunction is further discussed in terms of the writers' choice of Topical Marked and Unmarked Themes, Textual Theme and Interpersonal Theme. Both writers seem to prefer using Topical Unmarked Themes in their writing compared to Marked Themes. This is probably because the intended audience are general, hence the need to be rather straightforward in presenting information. We have also seen that the major difference between the two letters in terms of the textual metafunction is not the use of Interpersonal Theme, as one might expect, but rather the higher use of Textual Themes. In this study, what is rather striking is that both writers do not use the position of focus to insert their comments on the topic. In terms of Multiple Themes, the writers seem to be providing more insights into their opinions through Textual Themes rather than Interpersonal Themes, which are freely available to them. It can be concluded that both writers chose to express their opinions objectively in order to give readers the upper hand in forming their

This significantly shows how the writers carefully judge the extent of their proposition by focusing on the information rather than personal feelings. Hence, this study indicates that the writers are more concerned in imparting knowledge rather than promoting personal opinions. Based on the findings, it is suggested that more studies on Malaysian editorials are conducted. Studies involving other sections of newspaper such as the advertorials and news reports are also advised to see whether the current findings extend to these areas or are limited to editorials. Additionally, a bigger corpus in exploring Malaysian editorials is recommended so as to offer a better insight.

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