Chapter 6  Organizing the message: the textual metafunction – Theme

ANSWERS

1  Types of Theme

The table below gives just one example of each category that occurs – there are, of course, many others of most of the categories that you may have found.

Before searching for the examples myself, I predicted that I was unlikely to find Complement as marked Theme, since this is very marked and associated with rhetorical registers and strongly contrastive contexts; and I also assumed that preposed Theme would not occur, since this is more typical of informal speech. However, I was surprised to find no examples of clause as Subject Theme (strictly speaking, of course, in thematic equatives the WH-clause is typically Subject Theme; but they form a separate category). In fact, I should probably not have been surprised: a search of other chapters in the book shows that they occur only rarely. Here is one example from Chapter 3: ‘To label ‘you’ as Actor, for example, indicates that this element of the clause has the function of expressing the (possible) ‘doer’ of the action expressed in the process’.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme type</th>
<th>example (Theme underlined)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unmarked:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: group</td>
<td>Conjunction obviously works primarily between two or more clauses.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject: clause</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH-Subject</td>
<td>But what happens when we have a clause complex consisting of more than one clause?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH-Complement</td>
<td>What won’t I learn here?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WH-Adjunct</td>
<td>Why has he said that the book is bad if I can learn useful information from it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Predicator</td>
<td>Identify the Theme in the following sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>marked:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjunct</td>
<td>In this first part, Chapter 6, we will be dealing with Theme.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complement</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dependent clause</td>
<td>When we look at language from the point of view of the textual metafunction, we are trying to see how speakers construct their messages in a way which makes them fit smoothly into the unfolding language event</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>enhanced:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>predicated Theme</td>
<td>It is, of course, the finite verbal operator which expresses polarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>thematic equative</td>
<td>What we have identified here are three of the main ways in which textual meanings are constructed in a text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preposed Theme</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
existential there

simple:
e.g. Subject

multiple:
+textual:
Adjunct

+interpersonal:
Finite
Adjunct

interpersonal clause

There are a number of signals in the second sentence here that it functions as a coherent continuation of the first

Conjunction obviously works primarily between two or more clauses.

However, it also includes more ‘grammatical’ kinds of repetition of meaning, but the original version also seems intuitively to be ‘about’ yellow canaries.

Can you detect any overall pattern in the way the Themes are working?

Clearly, we would hope that they would understand the content not just as an unrelated string of facts about languages, but arranged in a kind of hierarchy or tree diagram.

It is noticeable, for instance, that neither of the extracts from expository texts above includes any enhanced or interpersonal Themes.

(The final example above also illustrates a multiple Theme which includes both a textual and an interpersonal element.)

2 Theme in text

from the research presentation

can I

could you

[elliptical Theme – perhaps ‘that’]

it

and it

and on the oh oh one surface

so the atoms

and so up here

so each of these sort of splodges

we

and the step height of silicon

so you

there’s good reason to suppose that the

dimers

but that they

so you

it

so you

where you don’t see the zig-zag like there

and there and there

but they

so that

the last thing to point out

you

and remember

the horizontal scale on this picture

(It could be argued that the ninth Theme should include the interpolated clause following the Subject: ‘so each of these sort of splodges in so far as we can resolve them’.)
Clean surfaces of GaAs(001)-(2x4) By looking at the places where the regularity
After the Ga shutter had been closed of the reconstruction is interrupted by
and temperature of the sample additional missing dimers
and [temperature] There is a growing consensus that this
When a sample had been cooled below Surfaces prepared in this way
400°C It has been found that the behaviour of TMGa
and the sample on GaAs(001)-(2x4)
Images of GaAs indeed not only does the behaviour on vicinal
and [images] surfaces
The dimers it
and [the dimers]

As with the Subjects, which we looked at in the exercises for Chapter 4, one feature that stands out is that a number of the Themes in the book chapter are more elaborated than those in the presentation. In this case, this is not only because of more complex nominal groups as Subject Themes, but also because of a higher number of clauses as marked Themes (3, compared with 1 in the spoken text). In addition, the thematic analysis highlights the way in which the speaker in the presentation moves between starting his messages with aspects of the topic (e.g. ‘so the atoms’) and with interaction with the audience (e.g. ‘so you’, ‘remember’). This means that the development of the argument is in some senses easier to follow through the Themes in the written text, since they deal only with the topic (especially when one takes into account the fact that the elliptical Themes with ‘and’ signal continuation of the topic from the preceding Theme). This contributes to projecting the written text as more overtly planned than the spoken.

It is also worth noting that in the written text the only conjunction that appears in Theme is and, whereas in the spoken text we find and, but and so. The presenter builds up a relatively complex line of argument, with so signalling results of the event in the preceding clause or conclusions based on the evidence, and but signalling changes of direction. We saw in the exercises for Chapter 4 that the spoken text relies on exophoric reference in some of the Subjects, and this also appears in some of the marked Themes: in ‘up here’ and ‘where you don’t see the zig-zag like there and there and there’ the speaker is referring outwards to the physical context, the slides that the audience can see. The effect is to some extent of the speaker taking the audience through the process of reasoning as he himself had worked through it. In the chapter, on the other hand, there is little use of conjunctions or conjunctive Adjuncts. Rather, the coherence that is being constructed is signalled more by experiential means: most obviously through the marked Themes but also through the explicit objective modality in the interpersonal Themes, which represent an ‘experientialization’ of the writer’s stance (see Chapter 9 on grammatical metaphor for more on this). The overall impression is more static in comparison
with the dynamic unfolding in the presentation: rather than being given a guided tour through the topic, the written text offers a prepared map of the topic.