

An Analysis of Textual Themes in M.A Theses and

Ph. D. Dissertations

Written by Iraqi EFL Learners

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Abstract

The present study investigates the realization and significance of textual themes in the organizational structure of M.A theses and Ph.D. dissertations, namely: the abstracts, introductions and conclusions, since in such parts the students depend on their own expressions, styles and constructions to express different viewpoints, plans, inferences, etc. The study also investigates the similarities and differences between M.A theses and Ph.D. dissertations concerning the use of textual themes; it sets out to conduct a detailed analysis of textual themes used in such texts. In conducting such an analysis, the study adopts Halliday's (1994) approach of textual themes. The results of such an analysis have clearly shown that, in spite of the differences in the scientific levels of M.A theses and Ph.D. dissertations, they are almost similar in their use of textual themes. Moreover, there is a higher tendency to use conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions than to use relatives due to the formers' importance in expressing logical links between the contents of the text; and thereby helping the reader to understand the text. Semantically speaking, there is a significant similarity between the two types of texts in using the category of enhancement more than the other semantic categories of adjuncts and conjunctions.

Key Words: Theme, Rheme, Metafunctions, Textual, Topical

1-The Identification of Theme: An Overview

The terms "theme" and "rheme" have been invented by the Prague school of linguistics; themes are realized in the first position of the sentence or clause, while rhemes represent the actual new information said in the sentence or

clause (Halliday, 1985: 39). Other equivalent terms for theme and rheme are topic- comment, given (old) - new information and background- end focus. (Quirk, et al., 1985:643ff.)

Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics has inherited a theme-rheme distinction from Prague school. According to this approach, language is not only regarded as a set of structures but also as “a network of systems or interrelated sets of options for making meaning”(Halliday, 1994:15). In order to account for this meaning- making process of language, Halliday (ibid: 36) proposes three metafunctions: 1) the ideational metafunction (construing a model of experience), the interpersonal metafunction (enacting social relationships) and the textual meta function (creating relevance to context). These metafunctions are thought of as tools which enable linguists to analyse and understand the linguistic choices made in a given text. The systemic functional approach describes how information is distributed in sentences. Thus, it deals with the distribution of theme and rheme (Lepschy, 1972: 146-7). According to this approach, theme is the glue that structures and binds the ideational, interpersonal and textual meanings. Moreover, it plays a crucial role in focusing and organizing the intended message of the text. So it contributes to the coherence and success of the message (ibid).

Martin (1992:12) mentions that the choice of what comes first is “a textual resource systematically exploited to effect different patterns.” He adds that the different meanings and patterns made by the choice of theme can be manipulated and exploited consciously by linguists in order to convey their viewpoints, e.g.

1- The programme presents new horizons.

In this example, “the programme” has been chosen to be the theme of the

sentence to emphasize its importance. It also helps construe the intended interpretation of the clause, the sentence and the text as a whole. It is commonly understood that the theme is important since it extends the analysis of a text beyond the grammatical structure of individual clauses or sentences to the units of a text. At a higher level, theme incorporates the author's aims in participating in the discourse (ibid) (for more details about the importance of theme in a text, see Brown and Miller, 1980:385ff. and Palmer, 1982:158ff.).

2- Types of Themes

Halliday (1994:36) classifies themes according to their role and importance in the text into three types: topical, interpersonal and textual themes. He states that the theme of a sentence or a clause includes an obligatory topical theme and may also include optional themes such as interpersonal and textual themes. A topical theme is an obligatory part of theme. It is realized by a circumstantial adjunct, e.g. in October, before the meeting, etc., a participant, e.g. the manager, the programme, etc., or a process, e.g. determine, to be considered, etc. An interpersonal theme construes the writer's viewpoint and it is realized by modal adjuncts e.g. in my opinion, unfortunately, generally, etc. (Croft, 1991: 115; Ping, 2004: 25-7 and Paltridge, 2006: 145-8)

2.1 Textual Themes

Textual themes are typically thematic since they relate the clause to the preceding text and thus usually come first in order to realize this linking role. Moreover, they signal the coherence of the text, being concerned with the way in which the meaning expressed in one clause is related to that expressed in another, and are; therefore, textual in nature. Textual themes

are realized by conjunctive adjuncts, e.g. and, however; conjunctions, e.g. before, after, and relatives, e.g. how, which (Egins, 1993:46).

Halliday (1994:49) classifies conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions according to their meanings into three types:1) elaboration, 2) extension, and 3) enhancement. He, then, classifies each type into other three subtypes depending on their semantic status. Table-1- below presents the types of conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions with illustrative examples.

Table (1) Conjunctive Adjuncts and Conjunctions

Semantic Types	Examples
1-Elaboration	
Appositive	i.e, e.g., that is
Corrective	rather, at least, to be precise
Dismissive	in any case, any way, leaving this a side
Summative	thus, in short, to sum up
Verifactive	actually, in fact, as a matter of fact
2-Extension	
Additive	and, also, moreover
Adversative	but, however, on the other hand
Variative	instead of, alternatively
3-Enhancement	
Temporal	next, first, after
Comparative	whereas, likewise, similarly
Causal	so, therefore, accordingly
Conditional	if, otherwise, in that case

Concessive	yet, although, nevertheless
Respective	as far as, in this respect, concerning

The three types of textual themes commonly occur in thematic position. It is argued that conjunctions are different from conjunctive adjuncts as they do not only establish semantic relationships between meanings, but also achieve grammatical relationships in that “they construct two parts into a single structural unit” (ibid; 50). Relatives also relate one clause to the previous one, and may function as a subject, an adjunct or a complement within the clause. They are not considered to be a separate word class; they are nouns or adverbs (ibid).

If a textual theme occurs thematically, it may not exhaust the thematic potential of the clause and it is, thus, considered to be one part of the theme in the clause. Therefore, a theme may comprise several themes, namely: textual, interpersonal and topical, e.g.

2-But, of course the programme proved to be useful.

Textual Interpersonal Topical

Such a composite theme is referred to as “multiple theme” by Halliday (ibid: 52). The present study follows Halliday (1994) in that conjunctive adjuncts, conjunctions and relatives add textual value to a given text and they are thus considered to be textual themes.

3-Data Analysis

The focus of the present study is on the way textual themes are realized and used in M.A. theses and Ph.D dissertations, namely: their abstracts, introductions and conclusions; taking into consideration that in such parts students depend on their own expressions, style and constructions to express their ideas, viewpoints, plans, inferences, etc. then the types of textual

themes will be identified and analysed on the basis of Halliday’s (1994) approach of textual themes. The data selected randomly for the purpose of the study include five M.A. theses and five Ph.D dissertations concerning different topics in English language and linguistics. Table (2) below shows the frequency of occurrence of conjunctive adjuncts and conjunctions in M.A. theses and Ph.D dissertations.

Table (2) The Frequency of Occurrence of Conjunctive Adjuncts and Conjunctions in M.A. Theses and Ph.D Dissertations

Text Type	Totals	Elaboration		Extension		Enhancement	
		No	%	No	%	No	%
MA	171	41	24.0	57	33.3	73	42.7
Ph.D	237	61	25.7	51	34.2	95	40.1

Table (2) shows that the semantic category of enhancement is used more frequently than the other types of adjuncts and conjunctions: (42.7%) in MA theses and (40.1%) in Ph.D dissertations. Next in frequency comes the semantic category of extension (33.3%) and (34.2%) in MA and Ph.D texts respectively. Such frequencies indicate that MA and Ph.D students, although they are of different levels, have great adherence to enhance their information rather than to elaborate and extend it. Concerning the above semantic categories, the two texts show a significant similarity in their frequency rates. This implies that there is a preference to using explicable structures in which every clause clarifies and explains the preceding one.

As far as relatives are concerned, the two types of texts show significantly similar frequency rates which are the lowest ones in comparison with the other types of textual themes: (43.9%) for MA theses and (43.6%) for Ph.D

dissertations. Such frequency rates indicate that both MA and Ph.D students prefer using a condensed style to make their ideas follow more easily (see table -3-).

Table (3) The Frequency of Occurrence of Textual Themes in MA Theses and Ph.D Dissertations

Text Type	Totals	Adjuncts & Conjunctions		Relatives	
		No	%	No	%
MA	305	171	56.1	134	43.9
		237	56.4	183	43.6
Ph.D	420				

Conclusion

This study reveals the realization and significance of textual themes in the organizational structure of MA theses and Ph.D. dissertations using Halliday's (1994) functional linguistic approach. It is concluded that both theses and dissertations are significantly similar in their realization of textual themes. Although they are of different scientific and academic levels, both MA and Ph.D. students show a tendency towards using the semantic category of enhancement rather than the other semantic categories of adjuncts and conjunctions. In this respect, it can be said that MA and Ph.D. students are more concerned with the enhancement of facts, inferences and viewpoints. According to them, the constituents of this category enhance a proper understanding of their work and clarify their viewpoints. The similarity between the two types of texts extends to include relatives, the frequency rates of relatives in theses and dissertations are almost similar. To sum up, MA and Ph.D. texts are predominantly similar in their realization of textual themes, this may be due to their role as useful tools in clarifying the meaning of texts.

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Appendix I

The Types and Numbers of Textual

Elaboration	No	Extension	No	Enhancement	No
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on the basis	8	and	14	as for	6
that is	8	but	12	accordingly	10
i.e	7	however	4	therefore	7
thus	6	in addition to	6	since	7
e.g	4	as well as	1	whereas	10
in the sense that	3	also	14	regarding	5
consequently	3	moreover	3	concerning	4
in other words	2	on the other hand	2	in connection to	1
		instead	1	whether	7
				first	4
				second	3
				third	3
				fourth	1
				with respect to	3
				unless	1
				later	1

Themes Used in MA Theses

Appendix II

Elaboration	No	Extension	No	Enhancement	No
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that is	13	besides	5	accordingly	2
i.e	9	on the contrary	1	whether	3
if	1	moreover	4	and if	3
thus	16	and	30	as far as	3
consequently	5	furthermore	5	although	2
on the basis	5	in addition to	7	in this regard	1
in the sense that	2	also	12	despite	5
in other words	2	in contrast to	2	though	7
in the way	1	on the other hand	5	therefore	6
rather	1	however	5	nevertheless	1
namely	2	conversely	1	firstly(first)	2
for instance	3	on the other side	1	secondly	2
in this case	1	but	3	thirdly	2
				fourthly	1
				so that	1
				then	2
				during	1
				while	14
				hence	1
				likewise	1
				with respect to	1
				as a result	1
				as far as	1
				with regard to	1
				until now	1
				since	9
				in spite of	5
				as for	3

				concerning	4
				regarding	2
				so	1
				whereas	5
				finally	1

**The Types and Numbers of Textual Themes Used in Ph.D,
Dissertations**

تحليل ادوات ربط النصوص المستخدمة في رسائل الماجستير واطارح الدكتوراه

للعراقيين

متعلمي اللغة الانكليزية لغة اجنبية

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المستخلص:

تتناول ه ذه الدراسة مفهوم واهمية ادوات ربط النصوصفي تنظيم التراكيب المستخدمة في رسائل الماجستير واطاريح الدكتوراه وتحديدأ المستخلص والمقدمة والخاتمة بأعتبارهم النتاج الفعلي للطالب فيستخدم فيهم اسلوبه وعباراته وتراكيبه الخاصة به للتعبير عن افكاره وخططه واستنتاجاته . وتتناول هذه الدراسة ايضاً اوجه التشابه والاختلاف بين رسائل الماجستير واطاري ح الدكتوراه فيما يتعلق بادوات ربط النصوص .ولاجل الوصول الى اوجه التشابه والاختلاف بين النصوص المختارة، تبنت الدراسة منهج هالبيدي (1994) الخاص بتحليل ادوات ربط النص وص. وقد اظهر تحليل الرسائل والاطاريح المعزز بالجدول الاحصائية بأن رسائل الماجستير واطاريح الدكتوراه تتشابه الى حد كبير جداً في استخدامهما لهذه لادوات على الرغم من الاختلاف في المستوى العلمي لكلا النوعين من النصوص . أما من المنظور الدلالي فالرسائل والاطاريح تشترك باستخدامهما لنفس الانواع الدلالية وادوات الربط المنطقية.

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