

# LANGUAGE IN INDIA

Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow

Volume 12 : 5 May 2012

ISSN 1930-2940

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## Interpersonal Theme in Reading Comprehension Texts

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### Abstract

This paper intended to see how interpersonal theme and its types are tackled in reading comprehension texts developed by native and non-native writers. The present study relied on a corpus of sixteen reading comprehension texts extracted from four reading comprehension textbooks. To uncover the frequency of interpersonal theme and its types the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) model of thematic organization. The result indicated that while interpersonal theme was tackled differently by native and non-native writers, in both texts modal adjuncts were the most frequent types of interpersonal theme. The findings showed the importance of interpersonal theme and its types in creating reader friendly text. The findings of this study are applicable in teaching reading comprehension skill.

**Key terms:** theme, interpersonal theme, reading comprehension text

### Introduction

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One of the linguistic choices which writers should make at the clause level is theme. Theme originated from systemic functional grammar. Systemic functional grammar (SFG) is a grammar model developed by Halliday — the most well-known component of a broad social semiotic approach to language called systemic-functional linguistics, in the 1960s. Systemic-functional grammar is concerned primarily with the *choices* that are made available to speakers of a language by their grammatical systems. These choices are assumed to be meaningful and relate speakers' intentions to the concrete forms of a language.

According to Halliday (1985, p. 30), theme is an element which serves as the point of departure of the message and what the speaker has in mind to start with. It is the element in a particular structural configuration taken as whole, and it organizes the clause as a message. The remainder of the message is called the rheme. Therefore, a clause consists of a theme combined with a rheme and the structure is expressed by order. The order for this is theme followed by rheme. Halliday (1985, p.39) elaborates further by stating that, theme is what the clause is about and it comes in the first position, but this position is not what defines the theme; it is a means which realizes the function of the theme. In the same line of argumentation, Brown and Yule (1983, p. 126) use the term theme to refer to a formal category in the analysis of sentences or clauses in a complex or compound sentence. They assume that it is the left- most constituent of the sentence which has two important functions:

1. It maintains a coherent point of view by connecting back and linking into the previous discourse.
2. It serves as a point of departure for the further development of the discourse (p. 133).

Theme received great attention from the researchers in recent years (Ventola, 1995; Idding, 2008; Jalilifar & Khedri, 2011; Agawa, 2004; Denardi, 2006; Whittaker, 1995; Ghadessy, 1999; Ebrahimi & Khedri, 2011; Martinez, 2003; Lores, 2004; North, 2005; Berry, 1989; Wang, 2007; Ebrahimi, 2008, Ebrahimi & Ebrahimi, 2012). The results of these studies have shown that for ESL students to improve their reading and writing skills, they need to be aware of the implicit organizational patterns of texts (Agawa, 2004) that cohesion in student's writing can be improved dramatically if attention is given to theme selection and thematic progression in text (Wang,

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2007) that choice of theme are crucial to the success of texts, and writers may fail if they are not aware of the need to select the information they place in first position (Berry, 1989) and that thematic elements, organization and progression, succeed each other between the clauses, hence promoting cohesion and coherence to the texts and contributing positively to their texture (Denardi 2006)

Even several studies have investigated theme in different modes of language, but still scarcity is felt when it comes to interpersonal theme in reading comprehension texts written by native or non-native writers of English. Therefore, having the importance of theme in textuality of text; and also extremely low done studies in this area of research in mind, this study aims to investigate the status of interpersonal theme in reading comprehension texts written by native and non-native writers of English. The rationale behind shedding the light on interpersonal theme was that this theme increases the personality of the text by linking the sentences of the text (Hasselgard, 2000).

## Corpus

This study was run on the corpus of sixteen texts extracted from four reading comprehension textbooks written by native and non-native writers of English. All the textbooks were used for teaching reading comprehension skill in EFL context.

## Analytical Models

To analyze the reading texts in terms of interpersonal theme and its sub types, this study relied on Halliday's model of thematic organization. In his model, Interpersonal theme which consists of any combination of the *finite operator*, *wh-interrogative*, *vocative*, *modal adjunct*, *imperative* *let's*.

- A. The *Finite*, usually indicated by an auxiliary verb. It is used to signal a need for response in the thematic position.

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*Example 1. Are you going now?*

*Example 2. Should she study hard for the final exam?*

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B. A *Wh-* element usually indicates that the addressee should give an answer.

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*Example 3. Why did you do that?*

*Example 4. How old are you?*

*Example 5. Where are you from?*

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C. A *Vocative* is usually used to identify the addressee in the exchange.

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*Example 6. Tom, can I borrow your book?*

*Example 7. Mr. Nilsson, can you help me?*

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D. A *Modal Adjunct*, which is usually realized through adverb provides the speaker's comment or attitude towards the message.

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*Example 8. Surprisingly, he did not look after his father.*

*Example 9. Perhaps, Tom is cleverer than Bob.*

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E. *Let's*, is used in imperative sentence.

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*Example 10. Let's go to cinema.*

*Example 11. Let's play football.*

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### **Unit of analysis**

This study adopted t-unit as the basic unit of analysis. T-unit is defined by Fries (1994) as a clause complex which contains one main independent clause together with all the hypotactic clauses which are dependent on it (p.318). The rationale behind this selection was that: Analyzing theme at the level of t-unit rather than the individual clause makes it easier to focus on patterns of thematic development in large amounts of text, and can also be justified on the grounds that the thematic structure of a dependent clause is often constrained by the independent clause. (Fries & Francis, 1992 as cited in North, 2005, p.6).

### **Procedure**

At first the textbooks were collected and sixteen units from four textbooks were randomly selected. Second, the data were analyzed based on Halliday's (1985, 1994, 2004) categorization of interpersonal theme and its types. Third, the frequency of interpersonal theme and its types in different textbooks were calculated. Finally, in order to see the relationship between the two groups of the texts regarding interpersonal theme and its types, Chi-square was run on the data.

One problem with text analysis is that there is always the danger of making mistakes in interpretation. To increase the reliability in the analysis, two units from the corpus were also analyzed by an experienced researcher in applied linguistics and agreement was made on the method of analysis.

## **Result and Discussion**

The result displayed over-use of interpersonal theme by non-native writers compared with native writers. Non-native writers dedicated 12 % of their themes to realize interpersonal theme while this was only 3% of the total themes in texts written by native writers. The underestimate of interpersonal theme by native writers may suggest the factual tone of their texts. Inclusion of more interpersonal theme by non-native speakers makes that their texts to be more reader-friendly. This was in line with North's (2005) findings, and in contrast with Coffin and Hewings (2005) finding. North (2005) in the analysis of students' essays found (9.75%) interpersonal theme (p.7). Coffin and Hewings (2005) found (4.25%) interpersonal themes in the students' writings. They stated that the reason behind the underestimation could be that where the interpersonal stances are signaled by pronouns such as *I* and *we* in theme position they will be categorized as topical not interpersonal themes. One interesting point to mention was using different modal adjunct to present interpersonal theme in both texts. While native writers relayed mostly on adverbs of frequency (example 12 &13), non-native writers showed great tendency towards modal adjuncts which show their point of view (example 14, 15, & 16). The result is displayed in table 1.

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*Example 12. Sometimes I felt it was too big.*

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*Example 13. Often, students and teachers had interesting discussion, and there was no “correct” answer.*

*Example 14. In fact, the world ‘protein’ has originated from a Greek word which means first.*

*Example 15. Fortunately, your heart does not work continuously.*

*Example 16. Perhaps, watching birds gave them the idea.*

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Table 1: Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal Theme

	Non-native writers (%)	Native writers (%)
Interpersonal	16 (12)	6 (3)

The data analyzed in terms of interpersonal theme types and the result is presented in table 2. The result illustrated that both writers used only modal adjunct to realize interpersonal theme. This result was not surprising since Halliday (1994) stated that modal adjuncts express the speakers' judgment regarding the relevance of the message (p. 49). According to McCabe (1999) modal adjunct, one of the main realizations of interpersonal theme is 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. High frequency of modal adjunct was in line with Ghadessy (1995) finding in sport's reports. He found that the most common interpersonal theme is modal adjunct (p. 135). Finite operators, wh-interrogatives and *let's* were almost neglected. This may indicate that either of the two texts was not argumentative, and didn't include any question.

Table 2: Frequency and Percentage of Interpersonal theme types

Interpersonal types	Non-native writers (%)	Native writers (%)
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Modal Adjunct	16 (100)	6 (100)
Finite Operator	--	--
Let's	--	--
Vocative	--	--
Wh-interrogative	--	--

The result of chi-square showed that there was a significant difference between the native and non-native writers in case of interpersonal theme. This difference indicated that texts written by native speakers were more factual. The result of Chi-square result is showed in table 3.

Table 3 Results of Chi-square Test

Theme	Percentage	chi-square value	df	sig.
Interpersonal	12			
Theme	3	5.400	1	0.0201

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Critical value was 5.9915

## Conclusion

The data analysis indicated a big difference between texts written by non-native and native writers in case of interpersonal theme. The results suggested that interpersonal theme in particular and thematic organizations in general are highly effective and valuable technique in text development. Thematic organization enhances connectivity between ideas in the text. The result also suggests that theme and rheme patterning can be effectively applied in classrooms to help students in reading comprehension.

The result of the present study will benefit the EFL students and instructors in reading comprehension classroom. Theme awareness can help students have a better comprehension of the reading texts.

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