

Conference Paper

Theme and Rheme in Students' Writing

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ORCID:Nurul Qomariah: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9266-9462>**Abstract**

The objectives of this research were to investigate the types of theme and to describe the most dominant theme used in students' writing. The data were 35 students' Recount Text writing at SMA Negeri 4 Tanjung Balai, and the data were analyzed based on M. A. K Halliday & Matthiessen's Theory (2014). The research was done using descriptive qualitative methods. The data collection involved observations and document study. The results showed that the most dominant theme was the topical theme (311, 74%) and the most dominant element of the topical theme in the students' writing was the nominal group (222, 71%). The students used most of the clauses as a topical theme started by a word or phrase functioning as a subject and adjunct. All of the types of theme were used in the students' Recount Text writing, except for the interpersonal theme (vocative adjunct, modal adjunct and finite verbal operators) and a part of the textual theme (continuative and conjunctive adjunct).

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1. Introduction

Brown (2015:232) states that a study of language includes four skills, they are listening, writing, speaking, and reading. Among the skills, writing is the most difficult skill to be learned because it needs hard thinking in producing ideas, words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and paragraphs at the same time. Many students face many difficulties when they begin to write; for instance, the students are difficult to think about what they will write, and the words that they should use, because they cannot get ideas quickly also they have so many errors or mistakes in their writing. It is because they practice writing text rarely and not carefully correct their writing. Also, they may not be able to put their ideas cohesively in a text and the people who read their writing, especially, teachers could not follow the development of the ideas from the text.

Writing becomes the most difficult subject for many students. It is a work of inventing ideas, thinking about how to express the ideas, and organizing them into sentences,

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into paragraphs that will be clear for the readers. To be able to write effectively, the students should have sufficient knowledge of what to write and how to organize the language. Knowing what to write will enable the flow of ideas, whereas, knowing how to organize will help them to convey the ideas in a clear way to the readers. The students must know how to organize theme in writing. The theme represents “This is what we are talking about” while rheme is “This is what we are talking about it.”

To assess the students’ ability and difficulty in writing, analyzing the way students organize theme and rheme and also the interaction of a theme and rheme on their writing is one of the best ways. The theme is the starting point of a clause; that is what the clause is about. The remainder of the clause is the rheme (Paltridge, 2006:145).

The combination of words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, then those become writing can be brought together through the language that students use. From this research, we can know how the students organize their ideas in their writing; their theme and rheme go together or not to bring the meaning of the sentences. In the case of Systematic Functional Linguistics, the language has three major functional components called language metafunctions. According to Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:83), “There are three metafunctions of language namely (1) Experiential function, (2) Interpersonal function, and (3) Textual function.” Based on the three major functional components in language metafunctions, this research deals with the textual function of students’ writing. Therefore, the research will be conducted for analyzing the theme and rheme in students’ writing based on the facts, and theories above.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Writing

Brown (2015:335) elaborates the upshot of the nature of writing that has produced writing pedagogies that focus the students on how to generate ideas, how to organize them coherently, how to use discourse markers and rhetorical conventions to put them cohesively into writing text, how to revise text for clearer meaning, how to edit text for appropriate grammar, and how to produce a final product. The point of writing is about what in the mind is making the readers understand what has been done in writing and clear to express and organize them.

Writing should be organized effectively and include aspects such as ideas, word choice, grammar, and coherent; it is not as easy as we imagine. Writing is a complex subject involving generating and organizing ideas. Harmer (2004) explains that writing

is a way to share personal meanings. The people construct their views on the topic. They will give their views on a topic to each other then. Therefore, when constructing their views (ideas), people have to make it understandable and acceptable. Harmer (2004) then says that writing is used for a wide variety of purposes, it is proceeding in many forms.

Based on the explanation, writing is the process of conveying ideas about the writing to the readers which are determined by the quality of writing.

In writing, there are some characteristics of a good text or paragraph:

2.1.1. Coherence

A paragraph has coherence according to a principle of sentence orders. The sentences are put in order so that the readers can understand the ideas easily. The principles depend on the types of paragraphs we are writing. Coherence means to stick together; coherence is a matter of having the part of a piece of writing in the right and clear process.

2.1.2. Cohesion

Another characteristic of a good paragraph is cohesion. The topic sentences connect each other in all the supporting sentences.

2.1.3. Unity

The final characteristic of a well-written paragraph is unity. All the supporting sentences should relate to the topic sentence. Order in a text or paragraph is like an organization, but smaller in space so it may be simpler to consider the order as directed. Thus, order chronological steps are to express the ideas in the written form.

2.2. Recount Text

2.2.1. Definition of Recount Text

Pardiyono (2007:63) states, "Recount text is a text written to retell information about past events or experiences." People want to inform some activities or matters which have been done in the past, for example about vocation, weekend activities, or experience

in the past. Recount text is a reconstruction of something that happens in the past. It is an unfolding sequence of events over time, and the purpose is to tell what has been happening. Recount tells the reader who is involved, what is happening where this event is, and when something happens. The sequences of events are then described in some sort of order, for instance, a time order.

2.2.2. The Generic Structures of Recount Text

Pardiyono (2007:64-66) states that there are three elements which have been arranged on the theoretical structure:

1) Orientation

Recount starts by telling the readers who are involved, what happens, where the event takes place, and when it happens. Orientation gives the reader background information needed to understand the text, and the reader will recognize about scene-setting and context of the text.

2) Record of Events

The event is the main activity that occurs in the story of the text. In the writing recount text, events are ordered chronologically. Sometimes, additional detail is added to the text to give some information for the reader.

3) Re-Orientation

Re-Orientation is a closing statement that may include elaboration. Some recount texts also have a concluding paragraph. In this conclusion, the writer can give her comment or statement, but it is an optional one.

2.2.3. The Language Feature of Recount Text

Recount Text has some language features:

- 1) The use of the past tense to retell the events
- 2) Descriptive words about who, what, when, where, and how.
- 3) Proper nouns to identify those involved in the text.
- 4) Words that show the order of events (first, next, then, at last, meanwhile).

2.3. Meta function

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:361) divide and develop a theory of the fundamental function of language, in which he analyzes lexicogrammar into three broad metafunctions: Ideational, interpersonal, and textual. Each of the three metafunctions is talking about a different aspect of the world, and they are concerned with a different mode of the meaning of clauses. The ideational metafunction tells about the natural world in the broadest sense, including our consciousness, and also deals with clauses as representations. The interpersonal metafunction is about the social world, especially the relationship between speaker and hearer, and is concerned with clauses as exchanges. Textual metafunction tells about the verbal world, especially the flow of information in a text, and the metafunction concerned with the clause as the message.

2.3.1. Ideational Function

The ideational function of language is concerned with the communication and interlinking of ideas and may itself be broken down into the experiential and logical function. The ideational function is a way of a speaker expressing proportional content elements of his/her utterance, in other words, communicates their ideas. In operating this function the speaker refers to people, objects, and abstractions, actions, events, and states, features and qualities, and relationships of location, time, manner, reason, etc.

2.3.2. Interpersonal Function

Language is simultaneously used as representation, exchange, and organization of experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:85). As social beings, humans cannot live isolated; they need to interact with others to fulfill their needs so the use of language to interact is said to perform the interpersonal function.

The interpersonal function means as a form of action; the speaker is doing something to the listener through language. To establish the relationship between the interesting interaction, we take on the different slogan function in the exchange. The Interpersonal function enables us to develop social relationships to interact with others. The Interpersonal function represents the speaker's meaning potential that takes into account the nature of the relation between the addresser (speaker) and the addressee (listener).

Interpersonal meanings are embodied in the person system, both as a pronoun (person as things, e.g she, you) and as possessive (person as dietic, e.g.her, your) in

the attitudinal type of epithet, in connotative meanings of lexical items functioning in the group, and in prosodic features such as swear words or a voice quality (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:192). The interpersonal metafunction is concerned with the interaction between participants. The interpersonal relationship of interaction is realized through modality. Giving modal to a sentence is not making a categorical assertion, but is rather modifying their commitment to some degree by expressing a judgment or assessment of the truth of the situation.

2.3.3. Textual Function

A textual function has a close relation to the thematic structure. Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:89) say that thematic structure is one of the various structures which when mapped on to each other, make up a clause and will be considered the first one which gives the clause character as a message. It means that the element of a clause indicates from which the clause is developed.

The theme is the element that serves as the point of the departure of the message. It is the clause that is concerned (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:89). It organizes the clause as a message. The theme is followed by rheme. So rheme is the rest of the messages of the clause after the theme. Thus, the rheme is where the clause moves after the point of departure.

2.4. Theme and Rheme

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:89) state that theme is the element that serves as the point of departure of the message and locates and orients the clause within its context. Martin, et.al (1997:21) say that every clause is organized as a message related to an unfolding text. The system of theme arranges the clause to show what its local context about, the general context of the text it serves in. The system deals with the current point of departure about what has come before; it is clear where the clause is located in the text, and how its contribution fits in. This point of beginning of the clause or local context is called a theme. The remainder of the message of the clause tells what is presented against the background of the local context; it is where the clause moves after the point of the beginning of the clause. This is called a rheme.

The clause is organized as a message by having a distinct status assigned to one part of it. One part of the clause is called as the theme; this then combines the remainder so that the two parts together constitute a message. In other languages, of which English

is one, the theme is indicated by the position in the clause (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:87). The function of theme in the structure of the clause is as a message which has meaning, a quantum of information. The theme is the point of the beginning of the message. It is the element the speaker selects for ‘grounding’ what he is going on to say (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:83).

2.5. Types of Theme

2.5.1. Topical Theme

Topical Theme is the theme of a clause that ends with the first constituent that is either participants, circumstances, or processes (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:105). This type of theme is presented by a nominal group (e.g., everyone), a prepositional phrase (e.g., on Saturday night), or an adverbial group (e.g., merrily), as it can be seen in the example below:

Theme	Rheme
The King	has given my neighbor the prize.
Very carefully,	He puts the expensive glass on the table.
On a Sunday night,	I go to the movie with my friends.

According to the example above, a first clause is a nominal group “*The King*”. It is placed at the beginning of the clause, it is called as a Theme in the clause. The second clause has the adverbial group “*very carefully*” in its initial position. The last clause has a prepositional phrase indicating time, “*on a Sunday night*” in its initial position.

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:93) add that Topical Theme is divided into subtypes: simple and multiple themes. A simple theme always has a topical element. Here is an example:

Theme	Rheme
She	was so kind to her two cats

While multiple themes may have the interpersonal and textual theme in addition to a topical theme. Here is an example.

Textual	Topical	Rheme
And,	The servant	was waiting for the cats.

The other categorization of Topical Theme made by Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:100) is a marked and unmarked theme. When an element that places the theme position of

the clause complete with grammatical subject, this theme is called an unmarked theme. For example:

Theme	Rheme
The monkey	climbed the tree.

While in marked theme, an element other than the subject places the theme position, so a condition is created for the appearance of the marked theme. For example:

Theme	Rheme
In the morning,	My father always drinks coffee.

2.5.2. Interpersonal Theme

According to Paltridge (2006:147), “Interpersonal Theme refers to an item that comes before Rheme which indicates the relation between the participants in the text, or the position or point of view that is being taken in the clause.” This may include vocative, modal/comment adjuncts, and finite verbal operators (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014:108).

1) The Vocative is any item, typically (but not necessary) a personal name, used to address.

Example of Vocative:

Theme		Rheme
Vocative	Topical	
Mary,	You	should read Laskar Pelangi Novel.

2) Modal/comment Adjunct is the speaker/writer’s judgment on or attitude to the content of the message.

Example of Modal/comment Adjunct:

Theme		Rheme
Modal/comment adjunct	Topical	
Probably,	She	will pass the exam.

3) The Finite Verbal Operator is the small set of finite auxiliary verbs construing primary tenses or modality; they are the unmarked Theme of yes/no interrogatives.

Example of Finite Verbal Operator:

Theme		Rheme
Finite Verbal Operator	Topical	
Could	She	pass the exam?

2.5.3. Textual Theme

Halliday & Matthiessen (2014:107-108) state that Textual Theme is any combination of Continuative, Conjunction, and Conjunctive Adjunct.

1) Continuative is one of a small set of words that signal a move in the discourse: a response, in dialogue, or a new move to the next point. If the same speaker is continuing. Example of Continuative:

Theme		Rheme
Continuative	Topical	
Well,	I	will tell you now.

2) A Conjunction is a word or group that either link (paratactic) or binds (hypotactic) the clause in which it occurs structurally to another clause. Example of conjunction:

Theme		Rheme
Conjunction	Topical	
And,	She	came to me.

3) Conjunctive Adjunct is adverbial groups or prepositional phrases that relate the clause to the preceding text. Example of Conjunctive:

Theme		Rheme
Conjunctive	Topical	
On the other hand,	We	wait until Tuesday.

3. Research Method

This study was conducted by using descriptive qualitative method purposed to find out the types of Theme and Rheme. Qualitative research was related to assisting in describing the common elements of the various forms of qualitative methods. Creswell (2014:254) says that the descriptive qualitative study is aimed at investigating detail rendering of people, places, or events in a setting in a qualitative approach. It means this research does not intend to find a new theory but to find new evidence through the truth of certain theories. In this study, the data were students' writing of Senior High School. The analysis of this study was supported by the references of library research.

This method was carried out by selecting the theories, sources, from relevant books and journals that supported the analysis of Theme and Rheme.

The data were students' writing recount text. There were 35 students' writings recount text. The data source was taken from the second-grade students of SMA Negeri 4 Tanjungbalai in Academic Year 2019-2020. There were four classes of XI IPA. Every class had 35 students. The writer chose XI-1 IPA. The writers choose this class randomly. The observation was conducted by researchers to analyze Theme and Rheme of the students' writing recount text. The documentation technique was also used in this research to analyze Theme and Rheme in students' writing recount text. The steps of the analysis included: Identifying the Theme and Rheme by underlining them, classifying the types of Theme in the table, describing the dominant type of Theme from Students' writing, Counting the percentage of each type of Theme, and conclude. The formula of this study was:

$$X = \frac{F}{N} \times 100\%$$

X = the percentage of the obtained items

F = frequency

N = the total number of items

4. Result and Discussion

The findings show that the theory of Theme and Rheme as one of the realizations of Thematic structure in Functional Grammar was applied in the students' writing recount of senior high school. The finding also showed two types of Theme used in the texts. The dominant type of Theme used in that students' writing was Topical Theme, 311 (74%). The second one was Textual Theme, 111 (26%). There was no interpersonal theme in students' writing recount text. This means that the students used many declarative clauses and most of the clauses as a topical theme were started by word or phrase functioning as a subject and adjunct.

Types of Theme in students' writing could be presented that nominal group 222 (71%). Preposition Phrase 42 (14%), and Adverbial Group 47 (15 %) so the dominant of Topical Theme was The nominal Groups 222 (71%). Textual Theme consists of continuative (0%), conjunction 111 (100%), conjunctive adjunct (0%). The students used many nominal Groups, it was because most of the clauses as Topical Theme were started by word or phrase had functioned as a subject; the students presented some adverbs and prepositions in the first positions, and they also used some conjunctions to link one clause to another clause.

In the process of analysis, the researcher also finds the Marked and Unmarked Theme. There were 29 % Marked theme, while Unmarked was 71 %. This meant there were more unmarked Theme used in whole students' writings recount text because the students' writings were presented by word or phrase as a subject.

Textual Theme as the objective of the study in this analysis had 26 % from around the whole students' writing. The textual function of language is an interpretation of language in its function as a message that is realized by theme.

There are some representative examples of data:

4.1. Topical Theme

1) Nominal Group

We	looked at the making process of the terrace.
Nominal Group	Rheme
Unmarked, Topical Theme	
My friends	didn't want to go home.
Nominal Group	Rheme
Unmarked, Topical Theme	

2) Prepositional Phrase

In the hospital,	Her father parked the car in no parking area.
Prepositional Phrase	Rheme
Marked, Topical Theme	
On my vacation in Berastagi,	I really loved the beautiful scenery.
Prepositional Phrase	Rheme
Marked, Topical Theme	

3) Adverb Group

Two days ago,	I went to Gadabu Beach.
Adverb Group	Rheme
Marked, Topical Theme	
There,	We enjoyed the environment.
Adverb Group	Rheme
Marked, Topical Theme	

4.2. Textual Theme

1) Conjunction

Because	The sky	had been dark,
Conjunction	Topical	Rheme
Theme		
Because	The air	was so fresh,
Conjunction	Topical	Rheme
Theme		

5. Conclusion

After analyzing the types of Theme in students' writing, the researcher finds some conclusions as follows: There are two types of Theme realized in Students' writing. Topical and textual are in 422 occurrences. The most dominant types of theme is Topical Theme and the most dominant of Topical Theme is nominal Theme, and there are more unmarked themes in Students' writing recount text than the marked theme and almost various elements of the theme are used in students' writing recount text, except interpersonal and the two elements in Textual Theme, continuative, and conjunctive adjunct.

Appendices

1. AM

On my vacation in Berastagi, I really loved the beautiful scenery. I was very happy because the air was so fresh. I went with my friends. My friends did not want to go home. There, we enjoyed the environment, I wanted to stay here for a long time. The environment was so clean from rubbish, I hope I would come here again.

2. JYM

One year ago, I went to Ponot together with my family. On the way, I looked scenery so beautiful and I enjoyed it, the water fell, it was so beautiful. We swam there, there were so many people. We rested because we were tired and we went home.

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No	Theme				Rheme
	Textual Theme	Interpersonal Theme	Topical Theme		
			Marked Theme	Unmarked Theme	
1.			On my vacation in Berastagi,		I really loved the beautiful scenery.
2.				I	was very happy
3.	Because			the air	was so fresh.
4.				I	went with my friends.
5.				My friends	did not want to go home.
6.			There,		we enjoyed the environment,
7.				I	wanted to stay here for a long time.
8.				The environment	was so clean from rubbish.
9.				I	hope
10.				I	would come here again.

No	Theme				Rheme
	Textual Theme	Interpersonal Theme	Topical Theme		
			Marked Theme	Unmarked Theme	
1.			One year ago,		I went to Ponot together with my family.
2.			On the way,		I looked scenery so beautiful
3.	And			I	enjoyed it.
4.				The water	fell,
5.				It	was so beautiful.
6.				We	swam there,
7.				There	were so many people.
8.				We	rested
9.	Because			we	were tired
10.	And			we	went home.

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